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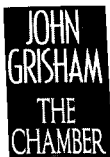
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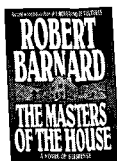
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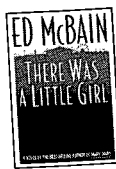
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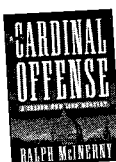
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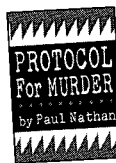
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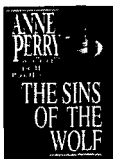
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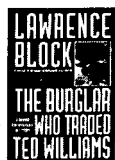
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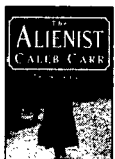
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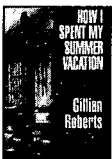
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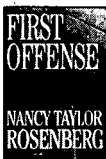
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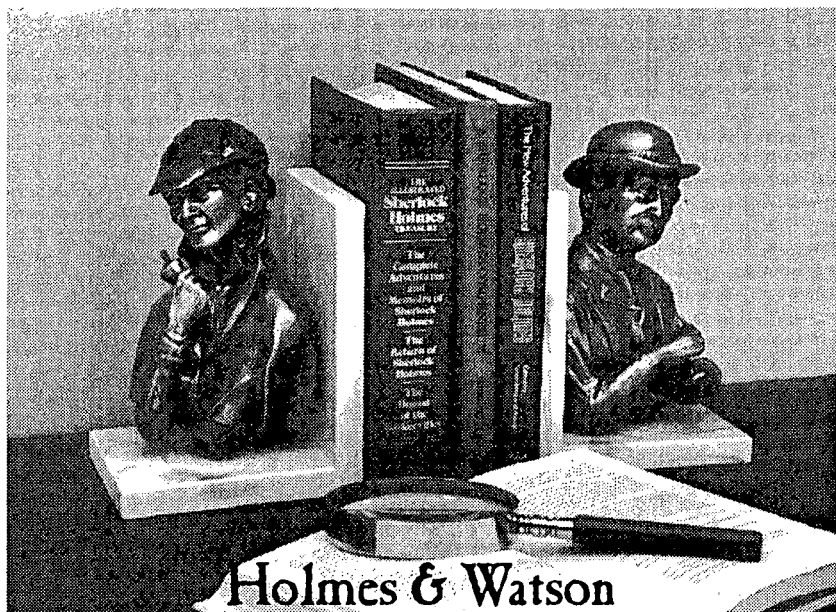
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EDITOR'S NOTES

by Cathleen Jordan

We are pleased to bring you in this issue our first story by John Mortimer, author of the Rum-pole series. "Laura Norder," published here for the first time in this country, was written for a British short story collection titled *Raconteur*; we thought you would enjoy it.

Also new to us is Martin Hill; author of "Destroyer Turns," his third short story to see major publication though as a journalist he has written lots of nonfiction, with credits far too numerous for us to include here. We can say, however, that he has won two William Allen White awards for investigative reporting, has covered intelligence and smuggling operations, government misdeeds, and Middle East events

from the hostage crisis in the 1970's to the shooting down of the Iranian airliner by the *Vincennes* in 1988 (his series on that subject was bought by the U.S. Military Academy at West Point for its students' curriculum), and was even the reporter who tracked down the dethroned Shah of Iran's mother and sister in hiding at the Rancho Mirage estate of Walter Annenberg.

He tells us that he also "served seven years in the U.S. Coast Guard Reserve as a search-and-rescue boat skipper" and was "trained by the Coast Guard as a federal law enforcement officer," a background that no doubt served him in writing "Destroyer Turns."

(continued on page 149)

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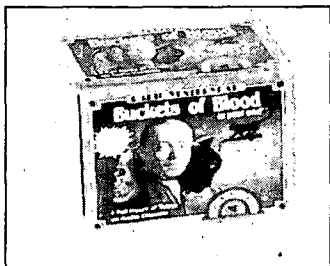
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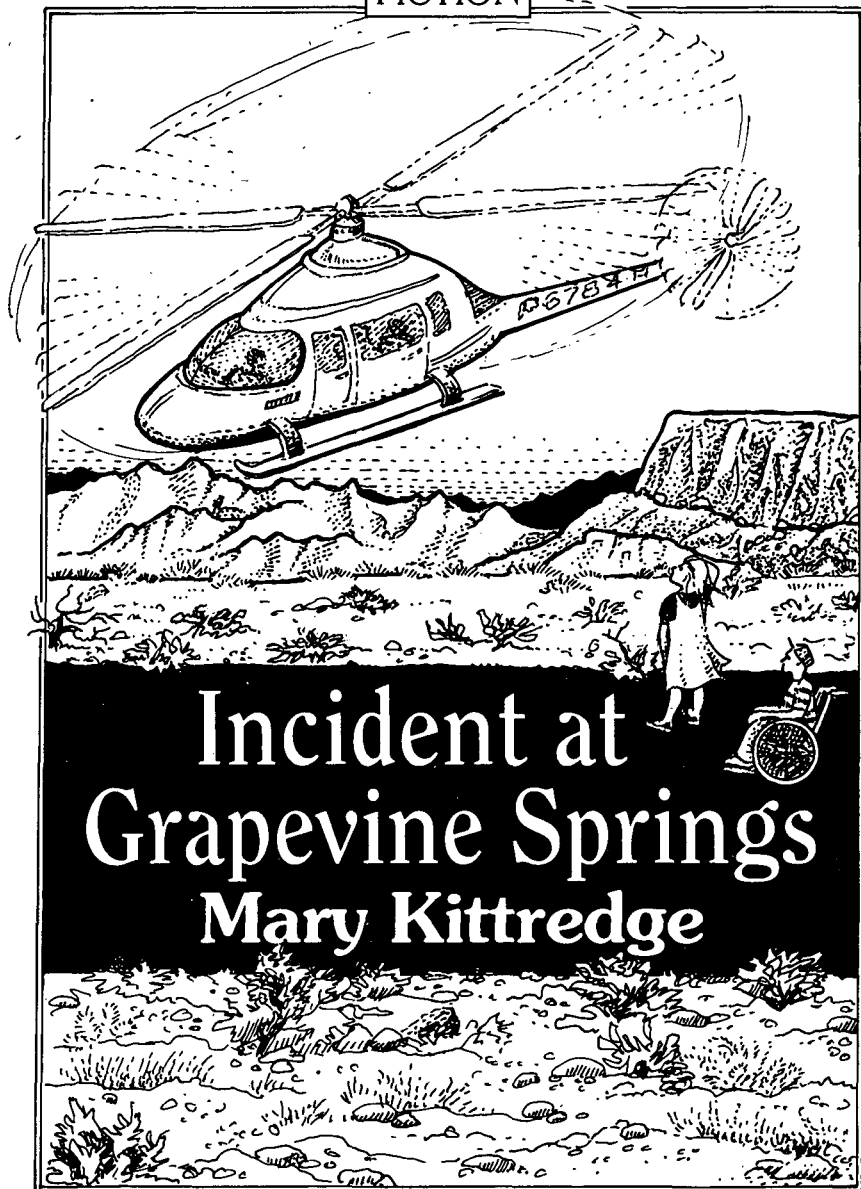
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FICTION



Incident at Grapevine Springs Mary Kittredge

Illustration by Laurie Davis

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“Nature,” said my literary agent Bernie Holloway in the smooth, silky tones he always uses when he’s trying to talk me into a project ten other writers have already turned down. “Purge your body of poisons and pollutants, Charlotte, and detoxify your inner soul.”

Sweetly, I refrained from telling him that if anyone needed purging he did. Bernie thinks the five major food groups are sugar, salt, fat, caffeine, and alcohol, and he regards nicotine as an essential vitamin.

Meanwhile, any sludge that is in my inner soul is probably in there for a reason, and I am not about to go carelessly dislodging it; for all I know, fragments of it might break off and obstruct my karmic channels, and then where would I be?

“Bernie,” I said, “I refuse to go visit a commune and eat brown rice and sit around investigating my belly button just so some guy named Ubi Shubi can learn how to write a book.”

I took a deep breath; this next part was important to me. “Which I won’t be able to teach him anyway because nobody can; he’ll just have to learn to write on his own, by the equivalent of pounding his head against a wall while sticking

red-hot pins under his fingernails like everybody else.”

“Uri Shuru,” Bernie corrected. “And it’s not a commune; it’s a well run, ecologically progressive health spa, and Uri is a bright, charming fellow. He just needs . . .”

“Charming, my Aunt Fanny. These guys are all the same. The places they run are about as comfortable as boot camp, and after you pay a million dollars to go there, you find out they’re off swilling champagne on the Concorde and guess what they’re using to finance their little expedition?”

“ . . . a bit of help in the prose composition department,” Bernie said, “for which he is willing to pay. Quite generously, too, I might add.”

Then he named a figure the size of which sucked all the air out of my lungs. It also erased all thought of those ten other writers who had already refused the money for reasons Bernie was carefully not disclosing to me until after the contracts got signed, although as far as I was concerned he could have saved himself the trouble.

For that kind of cash, I’d have written the guy’s book for him. I’d have manufactured the paper and invented the printing press, too, if those services had been required.

In point of fact, though, none of my services were required because by the time I arrived at the Grapevine Springs Ranch and Health Spa, Uri Shuru was already dead.

Well, none of my *literary* services, anyway.

Somewhere in this world there is a teenage boy who does not regard his mother as a Befuddled Person. I can report with complete certainty, however, that he is not living at my house. Joey thinks I am approximately as capable of conducting the routine, ordinary affairs of life as he is of getting up and walking across the room, and since he became paralyzed from the waist down at the age of fourteen, you can imagine how this works out on a daily basis.

Also, the idea of my taking a paralyzed kid along on a trip to a health spa appealed to his sense of humor. I had already warned him against pretending that the mineral mudbaths had suddenly crippled him—you'd think the fact that he was sitting in a wheelchair would rob some of the believability from his "Oh no, I can't walk!" routine, but it never did—and pop-fly wheelies into the therapeutic whirlpool were also on the strictly *verboden* list.

But as the chartered plane Uri Shuru had sent for us made its leg-turn over the Grapevine Springs airstrip, I forgot all about Joey's fondness for antics, and for gadgets including hand buzzers and whoopee cushions, a specimen of each of which I was sure he had brought with him even though I had forbidden him to. We were landing, apparently, on the side of a mountain, and the final moments of our approach were full of the sort of drama and suspense I always enjoy a great deal when they are happening to someone else. This was definitely the reason all those other writers had turned down Uri Shuru's offer: they'd heard about the landing and knew they wouldn't live to cash the paycheck.

Crashing, however, turned out to be the least of my worries. As I went shakily down the gangway and the baggage lift lowered Joey's chair to the tarmac, a young woman who had been waiting by the airstrip's Quonset hut strode energetically out to greet him. Moments after shaking her hand, he resembled the victim of some complex neurological disorder: his head lolled, his jaw sagged, and his eyes had taken on an odd glazed look I'd last seen the time he got bonked by

a wild pitch down at the softball field.

"Gah," he murmured dazedly.

I turned to the young woman, the fact of whose existence had apparently gone straight to Joey's brainstem and exploded there.

"Hello; I'm his mother," I said firmly, whereupon she smiled at me with such piercing sweetness that it was all I could do not to sink to my knees.

She wasn't even particularly pretty in the usual sense of the word, just so healthy that the glow of it seemed to come off her in waves. Her chestnut hair was thick and glossy, her skin smooth and devoid of makeup, and her green eyes looked damp and lustrous, as if there ought to be dewdrops clinging between her dark lashes. She wore a blue chambray shirt, jeans that did justice to her admirable figure, and a red bandanna like a danger flag knotted at her throat.

"Hello," she said. "I'm Hallie Frye, Mr. Shuru's assistant. I'm sorry Mr. Shuru wasn't able to come to meet you. You must be Charlotte Kent, and this is . . ."

"Juh-juh-Joey Rosen," he managed to introduce himself, and for the first time since he'd wound up in that chair, I was

glad he wasn't standing on his own two feet because if he had been he'd have fallen down.

"Well, Juh-juh-Joey," Hallie laughed; she was at least twenty-two, so she was much too old for him and it was ridiculous of me to be so nervous about her suddenly, "what do you say we head on back to the ranch?"

She beamed at me. "Mr. Shuru seems to have gone off alone somewhere without telling anyone. He does that every so often, but he always comes back in a day or so. You can get settled in and relax in the meantime."

Hoisting one of my duffel bags, she waved toward a decrepit-looking vehicle parked near the Quonset. "So, Joey, how are you at chair-to-van transfers? I haven't got a lift on the bus, I'm afraid, but I'm pretty strong."

Joey just went on staring blissfully at her. She was about six feet tall and a hundred and fifty pounds, soaking wet, which I felt sure was exactly how he was picturing her. Furthermore, the idea of her lifting him in her arms had captured his entire imagination; I could tell by the silly smile playing around his lips.

Well, probably not his *entire* imagination. I nudged him.

"Huh? Oh. Um, I can do it. Get in, I mean." He grinned goofily at me.

"Great." Hallie swung the vehicle's doors open. It was a 1969 Volkswagen bus, yellow with purple mandala and peace-symbol decals that the sun had faded to lavender over the years. I could just imagine it spewing clouds of smelly exhaust as it chugged through the Summer of Love, ferrying flower children back and forth from Big Sur to Mendocino.

"I ought to get rid of this old clunker," Hallie said. "For one thing, it absolutely swills gasoline, and for another, Mr. Shuru hates it. But I've had it forever, and I'm attached to it. So, Joey, are you sure you don't need a boost?"

She reached out and ruffled his hair; if I had tried it, he'd have bitten my arm off at the shoulder. But he just gazed goonily at her.

"Maybe I could use a little help," he allowed, which was when I really began to worry.

“Charlotte,” said my main squeeze, Robert Solli, “he’s a teenage boy. When you think of the hormones flooding his system, just imagine Niagara Falls.”

I pressed the phone to my ear. “He’s about to go over the falls in a barrel. She’s encouraging him. I just know she’s going to break his heart.”

“And,” Solli said gently, “he’s a paraplegic, another reason it makes us uncomfortable to think about him having sex.”

I collapsed back onto the bed, in my room with its view of the heated saltwater swimming pool. There was also a freshwater pool and one dosed with herbal essences. The spa at Grapevine Springs was not at all like boot camp as it turned out; it was summer camp, with champagne.

“I wasn’t thinking about him having sex,” I said, “and I’m sure *he’s* not thinking about having . . .”

Sex. I sat up again. Damn right he was thinking about it. I don’t know why I’d expected physical maturity to trigger an impulse toward celibacy in Joey, when in everyone else’s son right down through recorded history it had triggered exactly the opposite.

“I don’t know what worries me more,” I admitted to Solli. “His doing it, or his not being able to do it.”

Joey had managed to let me know that, despite the surgery that had damaged his spinal cord, in the procreation department he thought his essential

equipment was still hooked up okay. When I'd asked him how that was possible—he really could not do without that wheelchair—he'd just looked at me and said, "You know, Charlotte, it's not like I'll have to walk on it or anything."

Still, I was concerned for him. "And what if there are consequences?" I asked Solli. "Pregnancy, or diseases?"

"Well," he replied, "Joey and I had a talk about that sort of thing not too long ago. And I advised him to make like a Boy Scout and be prepared. I also told him that if he wasn't a big enough man to roll into a drug-store and buy what he needed, his physical performance was pretty much beside the point, and he agreed. So I think you can relax; about that, anyway."

Solli is blond, brilliant, and so handsome that the sight of him causes strong women to trip while walking on perfectly smooth linoleum. He is also a lovely fellow at heart.

"Thank you," I said. "That makes me feel better, I guess. The two of them are out together now. She's got this old VW bus, which reminds me, did you get our car in for its new emission control sticker? And she took him down the mountain to show him the countryside; at least I hope that's what she's showing him."

Solli laughed; he is the best-humored person I have ever met as well as the most responsible. "Yes, I got the car inspected," he assured me, "and maybe you should try to stop imagining what this girl is showing Joey; it doesn't seem to be doing your blood pressure any good."

"All right," I agreed, although the likelihood of this was low; my ability to obsess extensively over what kind of mischief Joey might be getting into was exceeded only by his ability to get into it.

"And Uri Shuru still hasn't come back," I said. "So I had a workout, a sauna, a facial, and got my nails done while Joey and Hallie went horseback riding. Then we had dinner, which was so delicious you could hardly tell it was healthy, and they scraped the plates into six different recycling bins. I swear, Solli, this place is so strict on ecology it's a wonder they don't come around collecting people's toenail clippings."

He didn't answer, which I thought was odd until I realized that the telephone connection had been broken. I tapped the button several times to reach the switchboard operator, who told me that the line had gone down.

This, Bernie had warned me, was a regular occurrence at

Grapevine Springs, which was so far off the beaten track that it sometimes took days to get communications up again. It was one of the charms of the place, Bernie said, that in some ways it was so primitive; Shuru hadn't even installed any computers.

So far nothing else seemed the least bit primitive, and I hoped nothing would; I could do without the phone, I supposed, especially since the office had a short-wave radio to use in case of emergencies, but if the plumbing or electricity went out, I would be summoning that charter plane back immediately.

It really was wonderfully luxurious, though, with heaps of fluffy towels in the bathroom and linen sheets on the bed. I was tired from all the pampering I'd endured; you'd be surprised how exhausting it is to have your legs waxed, your toenails polished, and your personal aromatherapy charts worked up.

I put on the chenille robe I'd found hanging in the closet when I arrived, noticing that it had my name monogrammed on the breast pocket; that, in a nutshell, was the kind of place Grapevine Springs was. A little while later Joey put his head in to say that he and Hallie would be in the courtyard, listening to

the string quartet that was playing down there, and did I want to join them?

I told him no thanks, meanwhile searching his face for evidence of Major Events that might have taken place in his life recently, but I didn't find any and he caught me at it.

"Charlotte," he drawled admonishingly, and it occurred to me that he was eighteen years old now, which was exactly the age I had been on the date of my first marriage.

"You and Hallie have a good time," I said, and after a while I went out on the balcony where the sounds of the string quartet floated on the breeze. So did quite a lot of the conversation taking place in the courtyard, especially the louder portions of it.

Which was how I learned that Uri Shuru's body had just been found, and that by the looks of it he had committed suicide.

The Ranch and Spa at Grapevine Springs was located in the high desert in the southwest portion of Texas. From the terrace of Uri Shuru's apartment, I could see the wide, lazily curving Río Grande, silvery under a full moon, and mountains like purple velvet draped against a night sky milky with stars.

"I had no idea," Hallie Frye sobbed, "that he was unhappy. Mr. Shuru seemed so . . . so *up-beat* when I last saw him."

A security guard making a routine check of the garage area of Shuru's living quarters had found him in the front seat of his car, a 1989 Saab 900 sedan, with the car windows rolled up and a length of corrugated hose leading from the exhaust pipe into the passenger compartment. The engine wasn't running, but the ignition was switched on and the gas tank was empty.

Joey sat close by Hallie, looking as helpless as only an eighteen-year-old boy can when the woman he loves is weeping. I went back into the apartment, a spacious collection of white-stuccoed rooms with high, beamed ceilings, Mexican tiled floors, and groupings of Mexican and Native American art objects on the low tables.

Shuru's body had been brought there by the guard who had found him, with the help of another guard; now it lay on his bed under a blanket. I'd had a look, and from the way his skin was suffused with a deep cherry red, I knew he had died of carbon monoxide poisoning.

"When did you see him last?" I asked Hallie. I'd tried the telephone again but it was still out, so I'd sent the guards to the of-

fice to use the radio to get help while the guests were herded into the banquet room and told a sanitized version of what had happened.

Hallie looked up, her face pink and tear-swollen. "It was yesterday. He was all excited about your coming here to help him with his book."

She sipped water from a glass Joey had brought her as I looked into Shuru's well-equipped kitchen. On the butcher-block counter stood a bunch of wildflowers in what I thought at first was a tin cup but which proved to be silver. Everything in the place had the lovely simplicity that always costs gobs of money. In his bathroom were the usual men's toiletries; the only surprise was a half-empty bottle of Valium tablets in the medicine chest, but I supposed even owners of ecologically correct health spas got the heebie-jeebies now and then.

"What did you think of it?" I asked, returning to the kitchen and idly opening Shuru's refrigerator. "The book, I mean." I still hadn't seen a manuscript.

The appliance's gleaming interior was stocked with scrubbed carrots, bunches of neatly snipped celery sticks, some grapes, and a full jug of something that had to be a blenderized health drink; beige

flecks of wheat germ hung suspended in the creamy, unappetizing-looking liquid. There was also a wrapped loaf of seven-grain bread and a container of alfalfa sprouts.

"There isn't one yet," Hallie replied. "I mean, he was waiting for you. But it was going to be the story of Grapevine Springs; how he started with nothing and got people to come here and built it all up until it was, well, like it is now."

Her tremulous gesture took in the apartment itself and all that lay around it: the guest quarters, the pools and exercise equipment and riding stables, the dining room and courtyards and concert hall and movie theater, and of course the landing strip for the charter airplane, cut into the side of the mountain for the exclusive use of Shuru's guests.

There was a road, too, that Joey and Hallie had driven along that afternoon, winding through manzanita scrub to the desert flatland. But only the help used that, and once they made the trip up here, they stayed for the season, putting their cars on blocks to save on the registration and to cut down on the air pollution that would be caused by people going up and down the mountain all the time.

Shuru, I had learned, enforced this rule strictly, locking up all the car keys and mandating that the gas be drained out of the gas tanks; he was a fanatic on the subject of air quality. Even the security people went on foot, or rode horses to patrol the farther perimeters of the property. I'd asked Joey particularly whether Hallie left her own keys in the bus, where anyone could get at them, and he said she did.

In her grief, Hallie appeared young and helpless, reaching blindly for the tissue Joey offered her. I wondered where in the world those guards had gotten to. "Have you worked for Mr. Shuru long?" I asked gently.

She nodded. "Since the beginning. When I came here, this was nothing but a bare plateau. Even the springs had to be opened up again, after a landslide had clogged them, and at first there was nothing to pay anybody with. Later on, of course, there were investors, rich people who saw Mr. Shuru's vision, too, but only after the sweat equity had been put in. We worked like Trojans to make this place what it is today."

Joey reached out and patted her on the shoulder, and she smiled bravely for him just as the guards rushed back in with

the news that the short-wave radio had been smashed and all the tires on Hallie's bus had been cut to ribbons.

So until morning, when it would be light enough for a party to set out on horseback, we were stuck here, without any way of calling for help or of getting word out about what had happened.

Hearing this, Hallie wept with renewed fervor, but none of it came as any shock to me. From the moment I had seen his face, I'd known Uri Shuru was murdered.

Joey did not become my son in the normal biological way. When he and I first realized that we were stuck with one another, I was living alone on the isolated north coast of California, and he was a twelve-year-old neighbor with spotty skin and bad teeth. He'd had a habit of standing out on the porch of the tumbledown house he inhabited with his family (all of whom were such utter airheads I kept expecting them to sail up into the sky like helium balloons), firing off the twelve-gauge shotgun his stepfather had given him for his birthday.

One day he fired it into my back yard, whereupon I strode over there to inform him that the range of a twelve-gauge

was sixty-five yards, dammit, and found him hungry, alone, and without any money. That was the first day I fed him, and the last day but one that I ever saw him cry; it was also the day I fell in love with him. Soon thereafter I took custody of him, and later I adopted him; two years after that, he'd had a spinal tumor removed in an operation that paralyzed him but saved his life.

Now he was six inches taller, forty pounds heavier, and orders of magnitude better looking, with curly dark hair and hazel eyes that were always laughing, often at himself. After I'd mortgaged my lungs to get his teeth fixed, he had instituted a diligent program of brushing, flossing, polishing, and rinsing; he said he kept at it in case he ever had to join a carnival and earn his keep by biting the heads off live chickens, but I knew it was really because when he got good things he appreciated them.

Which is to say I loved him dreadfully, and never more than on the night Shuru's body was found, when, upon quietly checking Joey's room at about two in the morning, I discovered that Joey was not in it. I hadn't really expected to find him there; Hallie Frye had captured his heart and taken him away with her to a place I could

not go, and when he returned he would not be my little boy any more.

Idly I sat down on the edge of his bed, then leapt up again as a horrid blatting sound issued from beneath me; that whoopee cushion, I realized, beginning to laugh and then to cry, but finally to laugh again. Thoughtfully I removed the cushion and placed it under the sheet on the opposite side of the bed, where he would land on it when he transferred from his wheelchair.

Then I went back to my room, which is how I happened to be standing just inside my door when the security guards I'd spoken with earlier came down the corridor, engrossed in a conversation I found interesting in the extreme.

Grapevine Springs, it turned out, was so deep in the hole that daylight was but a distant memory. The place took in cash by the bucketful but spent it even faster; there was nowhere on the mountain, for example, to do the laundry generated by a seventy-five room guest facility, not to mention all those pools and saunas, so it went out on the charter plane along with the recycling bins. On the return trips every bit of food and drink had to be flown in.

The guards wondered how the investors would get their

money back, since the only person crazy enough to want to buy or run Grapevine Springs was Shuru himself. They assumed the spa would now be closing and wondered if they would get their final paychecks; they wanted to know how much cash was in the Grapevine Springs checking account.

Suddenly so did I.

The front door to Shuru's apartment was locked, but the sliding glass door on the terrace side slid open soundlessly. I stepped in and stood in the darkness, getting my bearings and remembering that his body was still there.

Fortunately, I have never subscribed to the notion that the dead wish to rise up and harm us; it's the living I worry about. So the mound under the blanket on Shuru's bed didn't bother me much as I went through his dressers, his closets, and the drawers and cubbies of the old rolltop desk that took up a whole corner of his bedroom.

What did bother me, after I had found what I was seeking and sat down on the floor to read it, was Hallie's appearance in the doorway. She had a gun in her hand, not much to my surprise; it was all beginning to make a sad kind of sense.

"You must have been so unhappy here," I said. Nowhere near as unhappy as I was right that minute actually, but I had to say something.

"It's none of your business," she replied. "Why couldn't you just let it alone?"

"Maybe I could have if it hadn't been for Joey. But I love him, so I had to know about you."

I got up slowly. "Uri Shuru had the ideas, and you did the spadework," I said. "Anything that looked like hard labor ended up being your job, didn't it?"

Her eyes narrowed, but she kept listening.

"It was that way from the start, ever since he took you in off the street."

I held up a photograph from his desk, which was covered with scraps of paper, half-finished letters, pencil sketches, and bits of scribbled poetry. He might have been the smart, charming guy Bernie Holloway had described to me, but to judge by his desk he was also a bit of a flake.

Hallie had probably been too young to realize that, back when she'd met him six or seven years earlier I guessed. "You were a runaway, weren't you? Turning tricks, maybe, in Los Angeles or San Francisco.

Or some other place; it doesn't matter where he found you."

The photograph showed an older man, tanned and fit, with a bright, calculating expression, standing on a city sidewalk with his arm around a young girl whose eyes looked hungry and alert. It was Hallie before he'd poured all that health food into her.

"I'll bet you were the one with the head for numbers, too," I ventured. "That's why you did the bookkeeping."

Her lips tightened as she saw the ledger in my hand; the entries were not in Shuru's handwriting. She probably had the money she'd been skimming out of Grapevine Springs stashed in an offshore account somewhere.

"You should have left it alone," she repeated, raising the weapon.

Then, as if things weren't bad enough, Joey showed up. "What's going on?" he called from somewhere out in the apartment, and before I could shout to him, he appeared behind her in the doorway. "Hallie, what are you . . ."

His voice trailed off as he saw the gun, and me. "Oh," he said sorrowfully.

"What are you doing here?" she snapped at him.

"I heard you leave," he said, "and I wondered where you

were going. I came out after you, and then I saw you come in here."

But she hadn't really wanted an answer from him, and she wasn't listening to him now. "A book," she snarled scornfully at the motionless figure under the blanket. "Another one of Uri's stupid plans that wouldn't ever pay off: he would write a book."

Her voice dripped contempt. "Or you would, actually. And I'd get to type it, of course. He'd just have all the *ideas*. He was always very big on *ideas*, see, and on spending money; he just didn't like doing any *work*."

I had to admit, once I understood the truth, that I didn't like Uri Shuru much myself. He'd gotten hold of Hallie when she was young and vulnerable, made her dependent on him, then isolated her here and used her, first as the equivalent of slave labor and then, once Grapevine Springs was up and running, as his personal assistant. It was inevitable that she would turn on him sooner or later.

Still, he wasn't playing possum under that blanket; he was dead. "I guess I really showed up at the wrong moment," I said.

She laughed bitterly. "That's the understatement of the century. I knew this place had to go under sooner or later," she

went on, "even though he wouldn't admit it. So I made sure I'd get something out of it when it did. You can understand that, can't you? It was going to fail anyway, and I had to take care of myself. I was just about to leave for good."

"But planning his book had made him start thinking about the nuts and bolts of the operation," I theorized. "He must have demanded the financial records, or maybe gone to your room and gotten them himself. That's why you never had a chance to show him the legitimate-looking ledgers you'd have mocked up, just in case. And that's how he found out that even more money was going out of here than he was spending."

I thought fast; Hallie's frankness boded ill for my future and Joey's. She wouldn't be saying or agreeing with anything if she expected us ever to be able to repeat her story. But the only plan I could come up with was to try to keep her talking.

"He confronted you," I said. "He told you that if you didn't give the money back he'd turn you in. And . . . he must have threatened to tell me, too."

"That's right," she spat, waving the gun ominously. "So I got rid of him before he could. But you spoiled that by being

so nosy. Now, lie down on the floor, both of you."

So much for my plan.

"Hallie," Joey said, "wait. I've got an idea."

She frowned, and in that instant I glimpsed the hard, cold outlines of her heart; to her, he was merely an amusement with which to pass the time until her escape.

But he didn't see it. "I'll come with you," he wheedled. "If something happens, I can say Charlotte was alive when we left."

He shot me a careless look. "She's not my real mother, you know," he said scathingly. "All she ever does is hold me down. Come on," he coaxed, "get me out of here with you. I know where she keeps her ATM card, and the PIN number for it."

Hallie softened slightly at the mention of more money. "All right, but there'd better be plenty in the account, and it'd better not take long."

"You've got it," he said, and when he held out his hand to shake on the deal, I saw that he really wasn't my little boy any more. In his eyes were the same glints of cold, hard purpose I had seen gleaming in hers, and his grin looked utterly predatory.

Grudgingly, Hallie extended her hand. Joey gripped it and held it firmly, even as she

yelped in pain and tried to jerk away, dropping the gun; he was on it in a heartbeat, flinging himself from the wheelchair to cover the weapon with his body.

That hand buzzer, I realized as he sat up smoothly with the gun aimed at her. She could have made a run for it, but she must have seen that he would shoot her.

"Gotcha," he said, tucking the small, easily-palmed hand buzzer back into his pocket, and I made a mental note to buy him all the exploding cigars, squirting lapel flowers, and tins of sneezing powder his little heart desired, once we got home again.

"Uri could have killed himself because he was in money trouble," Hallie said poisonously, nursing her hand.

"Yes," I agreed, "he could have."

"And for all you could tell, I was as happy as a clam here. It was a perfectly reasonable scenario."

"Oh yes," I said again. "Except for one thing."

It was so simple, I almost felt sorry for her. Almost.

"You must have drugged him with Valium first. You're a big enough girl to get him into a vehicle even if he was doped up. What I'm curious about is why you killed him in your bus."

A look of spite replaced the thwarted puzzlement on her face. "Because he hated it so much. He was always nagging me to get rid of it; I think he hated it because it was the only thing that really belonged to me. So it served him right for me to use it to get rid of him. I had to move him because he would have killed himself in his own car. But," she repeated, "how did you know anyone killed him? And how did you know it was in the van?"

"Hallie," I explained gently; what I had to say was going to come as a bad surprise, "he hated your old VW because it emits air pollution. In the old days, cars put out so much carbon monoxide that you could gas yourself to death with a car and a length of hose. But newer cars have catalytic converters, you see, to cut the emissions. Shuru's Saab doesn't emit enough carbon monoxide for him to have killed himself in it. It might not even emit any. And since his red complexion shows he did die of carbon monoxide poisoning, it had to be murder."

I took a deep breath. "It had to be your van because yours is the only other working vehicle on the place. Joey says you leave the keys in it, so anyone could have murdered Uri Shuru: one of the guests, some-

one on the staff, anyone. It wasn't until you admitted it just now that I knew it was you. The gun didn't help, either."

She sagged, realizing what she'd done to herself. Outside it was getting light; we heard the horses whinnying and their hooves slowly clopping as the guards set off down the mountain toward the ranger station at Big Bend. A couple of hours later a helicopter set down on the airstrip; I explained the situation to a grim-faced officer, and Hallie was led away.

The *whap-whap* of the rotor blades faded, and Joey and I were alone on the tarmac. "I know you want to ask," he said, "so I'll tell you: I didn't make love to her."

I looked at him, surprised. "She didn't want to?"

He shook his head. "I pretended I couldn't."

"Oh." My capacity to absorb surprise was exceeded only by his capacity to deliver it, apparently. "Any particular reason?"

Shrugging, he began wheeling back toward the spa buildings; we were both exhausted and ready for a shower and a nap before the helicopter returned for us.

"It's the craziest thing," he said, "but Hallie and I were together in my room earlier in the afternoon, and she didn't think the whoopee cushion was

funny. It didn't strike me hard at the time, but later at her place when we had gotten sort of, um, involved, I remembered."

He laughed ruefully. "And it bothered me. Right then I knew she wasn't for me. We'd had a couple of glasses of wine, so I pretended to get too sleepy. And that was it."

I reached out and ruffled his hair, and to my astonishment he did not bite my arm off at the shoulder, but only because he was preoccupied.

"That reminds me, where's my whoopee cushion now, I wonder?"

His brow furrowed for a moment; then he yawned. "Oh well, it'll turn up, I guess. Boy, I sure can't wait to hit that bed."

I smiled innocently, thinking of what would happen when he did, and of Bernie's face when he opened the box of cigars I was planning to present him with: good, expensive, enjoyable cigars.

All except for one of them, of course.

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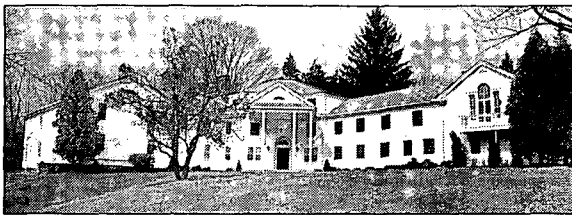
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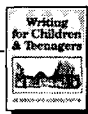
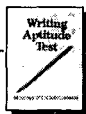
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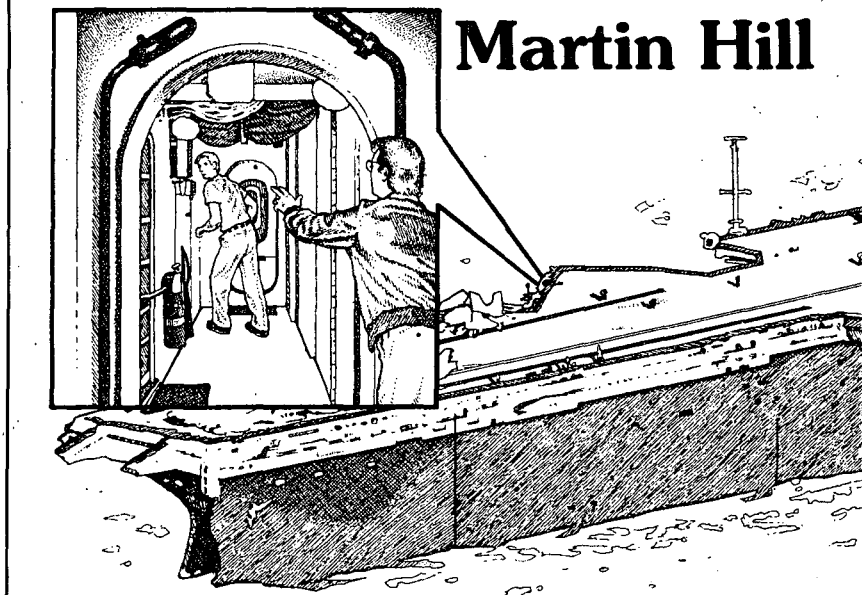
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FICTION

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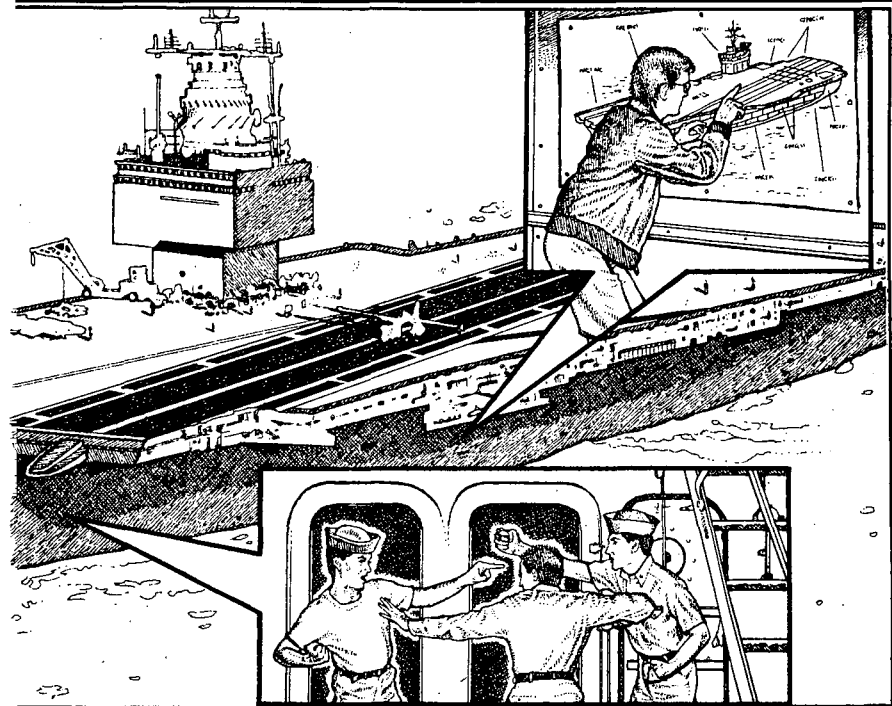
“Mr. Schag, I’m not saying I saw Chris Frye’s ghost. I’m telling you I saw *Chris Frye*.”

Lewis Brewster’s voice was soft, polite, and emphatic, with the touch of a Southern drawl. Tennessee, thought Schag, but schooled. The second class yeoman probably had some college.

“Why are you so certain it was Frye you saw?” Schag asked. “Maybe it was someone who just looked like him. Or maybe it *was* Frye’s ghost, like everyone says.”

It had been a week since Frye, a third class boatswain’s mate, was reported overboard and missing from the U.S.S. *Halsey*. Schag had gone topside when the alarm sounded and watched the small boys in the task force—the tin can destroyers and frigates—make their tight, high-speed turns to double back on the flotilla’s course and search for the missing sailor.

The larger ships in the force followed the tin cans’ “destroyer turns” at a more leisurely pace. Turning a nuclear-powered aircraft carrier like



the *Halsey* was a bit more difficult than turning a tin can, the difference being much like that between maneuvering a sports car as compared to a bus. But once turned back, the *Halsey* and its escorts spent three days searching the Southern Pacific waters for Frye. He was never found.

What was found, however, were signs of violence at the weather deck post from which Frye had disappeared. Blood stained the gray metal hand railing and deck plating where he had been working alone. The discovery had brought Li-

nus Schag into the mystery.

Tall and thin, with prematurely gray hair a little too long for navy regs, Schag was the only civilian aboard the *Halsey*. As an "agent-afloat" for the Naval Criminal Investigative Service, Schag was not concerned with the routine problems of shipboard life, including the occasional man falling overboard. But if that man was pushed overboard, perhaps even stabbed beforehand, then discovering the missing sailor's fate became Schag's job.

Solving the murder, in fact, had been easy. It required

questioning only a few of the "deck apes" in Frye's work division to determine that there had been bad blood between him and his immediate superior, BM2 Tom Fitzgerald. The night before Frye went missing, he and Fitzgerald argued so viciously that one of the chief bos'ns had to physically keep them apart. The clincher was the blood residue on Fitzgerald's knife: it matched the blood found on the deck, and both samples matched the missing man's blood type. Fitzgerald was now under Marine guard in the brig, two decks below Schag's cramped NCIS office on the *Halsey*.

That was a week ago. Ever since scuttlebutt had spread the word that Frye was murdered, sailors had been seeing his ghost walking the passageways late at night. The reports weren't unexpected. Sailors are a superstitious lot. Centuries of sea lore have told of ships haunted by the spirits of murdered seamen prowling the shadows of cargo holds and passageways, seeking redress. Now, as far as her crew was concerned, *Halsey* was a haunted ship.

Brewster was the first sailor Schag met who thought differently.

"I'm working on a correspondence degree in philosophy, Mr.

Schag," the yeoman said, making a disdainful face at Schag's last remark. "I've pondered most of the world's religious and philosophical concepts of life after death, and I've come to the conclusion there is none. As such, sir, I do not believe in ghosts, spirits, shades, or whatever. What I saw last night was Chris Frye walking around as alive as you and me."

"You knew Frye, yeoman?" Schag asked.

"Yes, sir. Frye married a Filipina lady a year and half ago. Someone he met on shore leave in Subic. Because of his rate and her nationality, there were a lot of problems getting permission. Frye was in the ship's office almost every day for two weeks filling out one form or another. I did most of the paperwork for him. Ever since, when we'd run into each other, we'd say hi."

Schag adjusted the silver wirerims on his nose. "And did Frye say hi last night?"

Another look of disdain. "Actually, he acted like he didn't see me," Brewster said. "He just walked past me and turned down a passageway. I went after him, but I lost him after he went down that passageway."

"What did he look like? Did he look different?" There were five thousand sailors, airmen,

and Marines aboard the *Halsey*. Schag figured it likely Brewster and the others had simply seen someone who looked like Frye.

The yeoman's hand snaked through his short, straw-colored hair. "He was pale, like he hadn't seen the sun for a while. Gaunt, too. He had something on his hand, like a bandage. He needed a shave, too, sir."

Schag dismissed the sailor and sat back. He knew people often saw things because they wanted to see them. Men on lookout reported seeing submarine periscopes that weren't there, ships that suddenly vanished into thin air, sometimes even UFO's. Glimpsing a ghost would be a story a young sailor could tell his buddies and girlfriends again and again. But Brewster didn't want to see a ghost. He didn't believe in them. Yet the man Brewster did see was unshaven and unkempt. That made Schag doubt the yeoman had simply seen a Frye lookalike; such a sailor wouldn't last long aboard the spit-and-polish *Halsey*.

And a bandage on one hand? How many ghosts wear bandages?

Standing, Schag examined a cutaway diagram of the *Halsey* hanging on the bulkhead. Something had persistently nagged him about the Frye

case. The evidence was too complete, too set, the arrows all pointed too directly at Fitzgerald. Sometimes it just happened that way; that he knew. But sometimes things just seem too convenient.

Brewster had said he'd seen Frye walking the starboard passageway on the deck directly below the hangar deck. Schag placed his finger on the diagram. Two other sailors had reported seeing Frye in that same area, but walking through passages cutting athwartships. Three had seen him on the next lower deck level. And one swore he saw Frye elevating above the O-1 weather deck, glowing with a celestial light.

Schag discounted the last sighting and concentrated on the others, running his finger along the diagram from one sighting to the next. All were several compartments away from the deck department's berthing areas, but well within sections of the ship the boatswain's mates would know well. All the decks where Frye had been spotted were easily reached through a maze of ladders and passageways.

He checked his watch. Twenty-two hundred. Ten P.M. Better hit the rack, Schag told himself silently. He was get-

ting up awfully early in the morning.

Even at three in the morning, the *Halsey* was a beehive of activity. The five thousand members of her crew, jammed into the equivalent of a high-rise office building, worked in shifts twenty-four hours a day. At 0300 hours, the public address system still piped officers and sailors to various portions of the ship, and the jets on air patrol, turboprop Hawkeye radar planes, and the SAR helos made intermittent landings and takeoffs for refueling or relief. Yet compared to the daytime routine, the *Halsey* at three A.M. seemed almost deserted. It was at this bewitching hour that most of the sightings of Frye's "ghost" had occurred.

Schag slipped into the officers' wardroom for a cup of coffee, hoping none of the officers he knew was up this early to ask what he was doing. He felt foolish going on his "ghost-busting" expedition. He hadn't even mentioned it to Master Chief Dutton, the ship's master-at-arms security chief. But Schag's curiosity was piqued. And, he repeated to himself as he went topside to let the wind whip him awake, something

about the Frye case had never set right with him.

Below decks, Schag walked the area where Frye had been seen, like a New York flatfoot pounding his beat. He came across mess cooks and watchstanders, floor buffers and men making late night visits to the head, but none of them looked like Petty Officer Frye's personnel photo—deeply tanned, dark hair, clean shaven. He was nearly ready to give up and head back to bed when he glimpsed a ghostly apparition at the end of a passageway.

Schag shouted, but the figure kept going. Schag walked quickly down the corridor, high-stepping through the hatchways. The apparition neither sped up nor slowed down. Closer now, Schag could see that the spectre was just a sailor in white dress trousers and a T-shirt. His hair was blond, not dark brown like Frye's. He was probably a mess cook heading to one of the ship's galleys for breakfast duty. Schag slowed but watched the figure as it turned a corner. Instinctively the sailor looked back across his shoulder as he turned, revealing his face to the investigator. The face was familiar; Schag had stared at it enough times this week. It was unshaven, as Brewster had said. What's

more, the beard was dark brown.

"Frye?" The sailor didn't respond. "Frye!" Schag shouted as he started running down the passageway.

The sailor disappeared around the corner. Schag made the turn, saw the sailor at the end of the passageway. He noticed what looked like a bandage on the sailor's left hand.

"Frye," Schag yelled again. "Stop! Ship's security!"

The figure in white didn't stop. He disappeared around another corner, heading aft. Schag ignored safety rules about running aboard ship and threw himself around the corner and through the next hatchway. He heard the distinctive clunk of boots going down a companionway and followed the sound down one, two, then three stairways, through a scuttle, and down a ladder.

Schag stopped at the bottom of the ladder and looked around, his lungs sucking in air like twin jet intakes. He was in a stowage compartment crammed with boxes and coils of rope. There was no other entry or exit. And there was no Christopher Frye.

"Chris Frye," Schag called out. "This is Special Agent Schag of the NCIS. Frye? Whoever you are then, show yourself."

There was no answer, no movement. Still panting, Schag moved among the boxes and coils of hemp and double-braided rope. He found nothing. The more he looked, the more he began to feel a chill inch down his spine. He tried to shake it off, but the chill persisted. He backpedaled to the ladder and, with one last look around the compartment, scrambled up its rungs.

““W e’ve been through all this before. Why do we have to do it again?”

Tom Fitzgerald's question was directed toward Lieutenant Nacine, the ship's officer appointed as the boatswain's mate's temporary defense counsel.

"That's a good question, Mr. Schag," Nacine said. "He's answered all your questions before."

"I simply want to know more about—the victim, Chris Frye," Schag said.

Schag had spent the rest of the morning drinking navy coffee in the wardroom. He hoped the strong, acrid stimulant would somehow counteract the adrenaline still rushing through his veins or, at the very least, wake him up enough to make him realize his

encounter with Frye's ghost was just a dream. It did neither, but the cold morning air on deck chased away his remaining sleepiness and helped him think more clearly.

Whatever became of Christopher Frye had little to do with shades or ghosts; of this he was as certain as Brewster. But what? Was it a Frye lookalike, a doppelganger? If he was, why didn't he stop? And where the hell did he go?

Fitzgerald smiled. "Why don't you ask *him*, Mr. Schag?" he said.

The boatswain's mate was short with brown hair and skin darkened by the sun. As part of the deck force, he had spent more time on the weather decks than most of the crew members, and he had what those who spent their days trapped in tight, airless compartments below decks didn't have: a tan.

Schag arched his eyebrows. "What do you mean by that, Fitzgerald?"

"Scuttlebutt reaches us even down in the brig," Fitzgerald said. "The ghost of Frye *lives!*"

The prisoner laughed, making ghostly howls between guffaws. Schag leaned back, chin tugging at his mouth. Lieutenant Nacine touched Fitzgerald's shoulder and leaned toward his ear.

"Agent Schag may be a civilian, Fitz, but he holds the equivalent rank of lieutenant commander aboard this ship," Nacine said, his voice full of command authority. "You will treat him with the proper respect."

Fitzgerald sat rigid in his seat, his dark face flushed. "Yes, sir." He looked at Schag. "I'm sorry, Mr. Schag. I didn't mean no disrespect. Down in the brig, we've been kind of joking about Frye's ghost testifying at my court-martial. Gallows humor, I guess." He looked uneasy at the description.

"Very well," Schag said. "You don't deny you and Frye didn't get along. Is that correct?"

"Hell, Mr. Schag, like I told you before, no one got along with Frye. Sure, I'd like to put my fist in his mouth. So would a lot of other guys. That don't mean I wanted to kill the son-of-a-bitch."

"What was wrong with Frye?"

"He was an undisciplined loudmouth," Fitzgerald said. He shook his head. "Thought he was too damn smart to be on the deck force. Kept talking about how he'd gone to technician school, how much smarter he was than us who had to strike for rate."

"Frye washed out of weapons systems school," Nacine said. "Attitude problem."

"Thank you, lieutenant," Schag said. "I've read his personnel file, too."

"There was other things," Fitzgerald said. "Like how he treated his wife."

Schag's raised eyebrows urged the sailor on.

"He goes and marries this Filipina chick, moves her back to the States," Fitz continued. "Then two, three months ago, he starts seeing this other girl. Started bragging around how he told his wife they changed the duty roster and we all had to stand more duty nights aboard ship when we're in port. That way he could spend the night with his new girlfriend without his wife suspecting."

Schag took some notes on a legal pad. When he stopped, he said, "Tell me again how his blood got on your knife."

Fitzgerald slumped in his chair, exasperated. Lieutenant Nacine started to protest, but Schag held up a hand.

"Please, just humor me."

The sailor shook his head. "We were working a detail together in the starboard hawser locker. Splicing some lines together. Chris said his knife had gotten dull, so he borrowed mine. He slipped and cut himself. He bled pretty bad—he

bled on the knife, on the deck—so I got a bandage from a first aid kit in the next compartment, wrapped it around the cut, and sent him up to sick bay for a look."

"And that was?"

"Two days before he went missing."

"There is no evidence he checked into sick bay, Fitzgerald," Schag said.

"I swear I sent him there. Maybe he didn't go there. Maybe he just went back to the berthing compartment and racked out. It'd be just like Chris to do that. He was always flaking off. You'd always find him in the rack or some other place he'd hide to get out of work assignments."

"Look, Mr. Schag, all I know is I saw him later with a clean bandage on and he said everything was perfect. I remember him saying that. 'Just perfect,' he said."

Schag remembered the ghost with the bandage, and considered what Fitzgerald told him.

"Is this all there was?"

Schag looked at the chaplain's assistant who had gathered up Frye's effects for shipment home. The young seaman nodded.

After talking to Fitzgerald, Schag did what he should have done in the first place, checked out the deckhand's story. In the forward starboard line locker, he sprayed the deck with an aerosol from one of the crime-scene kits he kept in his office. From the same kit he took a battery-powered ultraviolet light and shone it on the deck. It took several minutes of searching, but he eventually found the spot where Fitz said Frye had bled. Fitz had cleaned the deck after the accident, but the minute traces of blood still left glowed an eerie red.

Schag checked the next compartment for the first aid kit Fitzgerald had described. He found it well stocked, except for a space where a combat dressing should be. So far, Fitzgerald's story had held up.

"Yes, sir," the chaplain's assistant said. "That's everything. Not much, huh?"

When a man dies aboard ship, there is usually little in the way of personal effects to ship home. A sailor's entire life is crammed into a locker six feet long, three feet wide, and about six inches deep that makes up the baseboard of his bunk. Sailors, however, work hard at stuffing as much as they can into that small locker and the few cubic feet of their

coffinlike sleeping cubicle. But not Christopher Frye.

A set of dress blues, another of dress whites, a couple of extra sets of dungarees and shirts, and a couple of changes of liberty clothes was all the chaplain's assistant had found in Frye's locker. Not much for someone on a six month deployment. But then there wasn't much for a sailor to do aboard a ship at sea except work, eat, and sleep when he got to.

"Take me to his bunk," Schag said.

The seaman led Schag down several decks and aft, to one of the berthing compartments where the deck force slept. Frye had had a coveted lower bunk, and someone had already moved into it. The bunk's new resident was piped by the bridge and ordered to report to Schag. Without a question, the sailor opened his locker for Schag's inspection. Schag rummaged through the seaman's belongings, tossing everything onto a nearby empty bunk. When he finished, he tore off the seaman's bedding. Nothing.

Schag apologized to the sailor and assured him he was in no trouble. He was ready to leave him to straighten up the mess when he saw it. A piece of white paper poked up from the seams of the cubicle's walls.

Schag pulled out a small pocket knife and pried the paper loose.

It was a business card. Schag took one look at it, then rushed from the compartment.

“Be honest with me, Mr. Schag. You really think you saw Frye’s ghost down here?”

Schag grimaced at Master Chief Michael Dutton. The master-at-arms knew damn well Schag wasn’t hunting ghosts. But the craggy Dutton, tall and middle-aged, liked to pull his civilian counterpart’s chain. The two petty officers in the stowage compartment with Schag and Dutton did little to hide the smirks on their faces.

It had taken more than an hour to put through the ship-to-shore radio telephone connection. But it took only a brief conversation to make Schag certain he wasn’t chasing shadows.

“It wasn’t a ghost I followed down here last night, master chief,” Schag said. “It was Chris Frye. And I want to know how he got out of here.”

“You really think Frye’s still aboard—alive?”

Schag nodded.

“Just before we deployed,” he said, “Frye took out a pretty large life insurance policy on himself. I found this business

card stuck in his old bunk.” Schag passed the card to Dutton. “It’s the insurance company he used. I talked to the agent who sold him the policy. Two hundred fifty grand.”

The master chief whistled softly and handed the card back.

“Frye knew the policy wouldn’t have paid off immediately if he was just reported missing. He’d have to wait for a formal declaration of death, and that could take years.”

“So he staged his murder and put the blame on Fitzgerald,” Dutton said. “With the navy prosecuting someone for Frye’s murder, the insurance company would have to pay up on the policy.”

Schag nodded his agreement. “He created the accident with Fitzgerald’s knife so there’d be blood on it, then started the fight with Fitzgerald so there’d be witnesses to their animosity. Next day, he reopened the knife wound and let it bleed on the deck and railing. He could kill two birds with one stone in the process. Get back at Fitzgerald and get the money.”

Schag watched the petty officers moving crates around looking for some sign that Frye had been there. The more crates they moved, the more obvious their contempt toward Schag became.

"Seems to me, Mr. Schag, Frye was smart enough to know if we got even the slightest bit suspicious he might be going AWOL, we'd just put his wife under surveillance and grab him when he showed up to share the insurance loot."

"That's assuming he named his wife as beneficiary, master chief. He didn't."

The two petty officers finished moving the last crate, and turned toward Dutton and Schag. "Did you check those mooring lines over there?" Schag asked.

The sailors looked at the huge coils of rope. "The *lines*, sir? All of them?" one asked.

"All of them, Malaski," Dutton said. "And look sharp about it."

"Aye, aye, master chief," Malaski sighed.

"The insurance policy listed a Brenda Moorehouse as beneficiary," Schag continued. "A blonde, according to the insurance agent. Seems she's already filed the death claim. Frye's wife is a Filipina, but Fitzgerald said Frye had been bragging for some time now about having a girlfriend on the side."

"So he fakes his death, she collects the money, and Frye slips off the ship when we dock in San Diego tomorrow and meets the girlfriend some-

where. That's it?" Dutton shook his head. "Kind of risky, trying to hide out on ship."

"Not really, master chief," Schag said. "This ship is as long as a couple of city blocks. The average sailor knows only as much of it as his duties require him to know. And each sailor only knows a handful of his fellow crew members. It'd be as easy to lose yourself here as it would on the streets of New York City."

Master Chief Dutton sucked on a tooth and nodded. "Sort of brings us full circle, doesn't it? We not only don't have a murderer on our hands, we don't even have a murder."

"A complete course reversal, master chief," Schag said. "Like a destroyer turn."

"Holy sh—"

Dutton and Schag turned toward Malaski and the other sailor. They stood on top of two large coils of rope, looking down at a shorter coil. Malaski held what appeared to be the top of the shorter coil in his hands.

"It's some kind of fake coil, master chief," Malaski said dumbly.

Master Chief Dutton pulled a flashlight from his hip pocket as he followed Schag to the coils. Malaski handed the top of the fake coil to the agent.

"Mooring line wrapped around part of a wooden cable reel," Schag said.

Dutton shone his light into the lower part of the coil. "It's line wrapped around a fifty-five gallon can with its ends cut out."

"Who'd think of such a thing?" Malaski asked.

"A boatswain's mate," Dutton said. "And look at this, Mr. Schag."

At the bottom of the fake coil was an open scuttle hatch. A ladder led down into another compartment. Taking Dutton's light, Schag lowered himself into the coil and the hatchway below, where he shone the light around until he found a light switch. A single bulb came alive. The compartment was cramped and smelled of jet fuel.

"Looks like some kind of maintenance access for the aviation fuel lines," Schag said. "Other than Frye, it doesn't look like anyone's been down here for years." He examined the deck of the compartment. Its few square feet of space were covered by a sleeping bag and empty bags from MRE combat rations. Schag kicked the clutter around until he spotted a bottle and picked it up. "Looks like he lived by day down here, then came out at night to use the head, clean up, and replenish his water supply.

Fitzgerald said Frye had all kinds of hiding places."

"Speaking of Fitz," said Dutton, "guess we'd better let him out of the brig."

Schag climbed back to the top of the phony coil, grunting his consent. He held up an empty hydrogen peroxide bottle. "Looks like Frye also changed his appearance," he said. "That's going to make it even harder to find him on this tub."

Few social events raise as large a crowd as the homecoming of an aircraft carrier. Wives and children, fathers, mothers, neighbors, and friends crowd the naval docks craning their necks, hoping for a glimpse of loved ones lining the flight deck in their dress uniforms as tugs nudge the ship into its berth. When the mooring lines are set and the brows go out, the flood of sailors pouring from the ship meets the crowd of well-wishers in a chaotic press of flesh washed over by a wave of love, relief, and nervous fear.

Despite lookouts in key locations and identity checks at the quarterdeck leading to the brows, spotting Christopher Frye among the thousands of anxious crew members pushing across the gangway was impossible.

From their vantage point on the starboard weather decks, Dutton and Schag could see that their vigil was pointless. Frye didn't even have to leave the ship just then. He could wait in his new, unknown hiding place for days if necessary, leaving at his leisure when the *Halsey's* normal shipboard routine resumed.

Schag looked at the master-at-arms and shook his head. He pulled a cellular phone from his pocket and dialed a number.

"Let's hope our backup has better luck," he said.

Earlier, before she docked, no one aboard the *Halsey* had paid much attention to the blond, mustachioed young man who approached the starboard ladder. With sports jacket and fedora, one hand casually tucked into a pocket, he looked like one of the harbor pilots or their assistants, the men who guided the big ships through the harbor to their berths. The pilots and their assistants represented the Port of San Diego and, as such, always dressed to impress the ship captains they guided into the harbor. The boatswain's mates who placed the steel companionway over the side and secured its lashings simply nodded their farewells as the man left the ship. Even when the pilot debarked

minutes later, none of the young sailors remembered he had come aboard alone.

At the bottom of the ladderway, only one of the deckhands on the pilot boat paid him any attention.

"Who're you?"

"Friend of the pilot's." The young man took a bandaged hand from his pocket and gestured with it to the *Halsey*. "He offered me a ride back to shore. Gotta catch a plane, and it'll be another hour at least before this thing's tied up."

The deckhand grunted and waved the man aboard. Christopher Frye smiled, glanced back at the *Halsey* once more, then slipped below decks and out of sight.

Once ashore, Frye headed straight for a taxi stand. The cab took him to a small motel across town and let him off. He took a room, saying his wife was driving down to meet him with their bags. Once in his room, he picked up the phone and dialed Brenda Moorehouse's number.

She joined him forty-five minutes later as he sunned himself next to the motel's small pool, a blonde girl with blue eyes that gazed at him coolly. She smiled and cooed: "Hi, sailor."

"Hush," Frye said, pulling her close and kissing her. "Never call me that again."

The girl eyed him. "I like the look."

"The mustache or the hair?"

"Both."

"Did you file the claim?" Frye asked.

She nodded, and took a cigarette from her purse and lit it. "They said it should take ten, fifteen days to process. They'll send me the check." She shrugged her shoulders. "Piece of cake, just like you said, Chris."

"Piece of cake!" he replied.

A strange voice broke in.

"Don't eat that cake too soon."

Frye and the girl looked up. Linus Schag stood behind them, his badge wallet opened and extended. "Special Agent Schag, Frye. NCIS. We met the other morning, remember? You were doing your Casper the Friendly Ghost routine."

Master Chief Dutton stood next to Schag, a pair of handcuffs at the ready.

Frye's face went slack. He stared at the navy agent, then

the MAA. His mouth sputtered the word "but" over and over. Schag answered the unspoken question.

"We knew the odds were against our catching you going off the ship," he said. "You expected us to be watching your wife. You didn't know we found out about the girlfriend, and the insurance policy. We let the girl bring us to you. As you said, piece of cake, really."

Dutton drew Frye to his feet while Schag helped the girl to hers. As the MAA cuffed his wrists, Frye regained his voice. His bravado, too.

"Well, you got to admit it, guys. It was a really cool plan. Really cool. Get out of the navy, get some big bucks, and put that stupid jerk Fitzgerald on ice at the same time. It was brilliant, wasn't it? You've got to admit that."

"Nah," Schag said. "To be honest with you, Frye, I don't think you ever stood a ghost of a chance."

Frye and the girl looked at Schag blankly. But the pool deck echoed with Master Chief Dutton's laugh.

Laura Norder

John Mortimer



“**L**ittle Margery’s going to join the battle for Laura Norder,” Tim Oldroyd told their friends when his wife was appointed a magistrate. Law and order was one of his

favorite expressions, something he had always “stood for,” but he made it sound as though what he was standing for was a curiously named woman, poor old Laura who was under constant threat from

delinquent youth and the anarchist forces of the Party Opposite. When he boasted of his wife's appointment to the minor judiciary, it was as though he were announcing a singular and astonishing triumph of his own. As he told her every time the subject was mentioned, which was with embarrassing frequency, she would never have got the job if she hadn't had the good fortune to be the wife of Tim Oldroyd, MP for Boltingly and a parliamentary secretary at the Ministry of the Family.

Tim Oldroyd had been a pallid, shy young man, until some lurking ambition, as hidden up till then as an inherited disease, led him to stand for the seat at Boltingly. A change came over him. He announced that he was now to be known as "Tim," in the modern way of politicians. He became even paler and grew a paunch and a little sandpaper mustache. His voice, always high-pitched, now emerged as a prolonged whine of outrage. The most frequent objects of his falsetto wrath were schoolteachers, one-parent families, unemployed school leavers who went joy riding and traded soft drugs in the town's precincts, and those who slept in wigwams or up trees in protest at the new eight-lane super highway

across Boltingly Meadows. His rage was frequently directed at his wife, and then his squeals were weighted with sarcasm and interrupted by moments of light laughter. "For God's sake, pay attention in court, Margerine!" he told her. "You know how you tend to let your mind wander. Don't wool-gather! The clerk's there to stop you doing anything damn silly. Just get it into your head that, in this country, people don't get stood in the dock unless they've committed something fairly outrageous. Support the police, and you won't go far wrong. Who's your chairman?"

"Dr. Arrowsmith."

"Frank Arrowsmith's a wise old bird." The Oldroyds knew all the important people in Boltingly. "Listen carefully to what Frank's got to say. Follow his instructions to the letter, and you won't go far wrong. I'm sure he won't expect you to make a contribution of any sort. Are you listening, Jerry?"

In fact his wife was staring out of the window at her garden, the lawn she mowed to a soft green velvet and the long border, set against an old brick wall, in which the flowers were all white. The garden, more than anything else in her life, was what kept her with Tim.

"Yes, I'm listening," she said.

"I don't suppose you've got a suitable hat?"

"I'm afraid not."

"Pity! In the good old days, lady magistrates wore hats. Made them look imposing. That's not your line of country, is it, Margery? You couldn't look imposing, with or without a hat on you."

From behind the coffeepot, across the polished oval table with its Laura Ashley place-mats and Portmeirion breakfast china, Margery Oldroyd looked at her husband and wondered if he'd seem more imposing in a hat, a Princess Di straw perhaps, with an up-turned brim and a long ribbon, or a more ornate affair with feathers and artificial roses. How would Tim look, crowned with bobbing cherries like his dreadful mother? This unexpected thought made her giggle.

"And do try not to giggle in court, Margerine." Her husband issued a serious warning. "There's a breakdown of respect for all established institutions. As things are today, we really can't afford a magistrate who giggles." With that he left the breakfast table for the lavatory, and Bagpiper, the Scottie dog which, in the Oldroyd family, filled, inadequately, the place of a child, rose from the hearthrug and strutted off

looking, in its own small way, as superior and discontented as its master.

Margery Oldroyd looked back on twenty-five years of astonishing emptiness. She and Timothy had been at Keele University together. A quarter of a century before, at a party in the J.C.R., when Tim was a skinny student with fairish hair falling into his eyes, she had felt moved by the resolute and purposeful manner, that doomed but bravely undertaken battle against his non-existent sense of rhythm, in which he had tried to dance alluringly to "I Can't Get No Satisfaction." She was a spritely dancer, light on her feet as plump people are, a girl with large, surprised eyes who giggled a good deal. She was attracted by something in Timothy missing in herself, and took it for an infinite ambition: she couldn't guess that it would be so quickly satisfied by becoming a parliamentary secretary and the member for Boltingly. After the J.C.R. dance she led him to her room and steered him towards the bed. When, in a remarkably short time, it was over, she smoothed back his straying lock of sandy hair and mistook his incompetence as a lover for sincerity.

Nothing, on that evening, prepared her for the stranger

he was bound to become; nor for the alarming intensity with which, she found, she had grown to hate him. This hatred had been born and grew like an advanced and overactive child, even before he started calling her Margerine.

On the magistrates' training course, when they were lectured and questioned on the elements of the law and basic court procedure, Margery had found herself unexpectedly popular. She listened hard, picked up knowledge quickly, and showed no signs of giving trouble. Now her first day had come, and she was surprised at how calm she felt, far calmer than she had been at breakfast, when her hatred of Tim bubbled up from her stomach and seemed likely to choke her. Now, on the bench, she felt as though she were at a pleasant dinner party to which, she was thankful to say, her husband hadn't been invited. She sat on the chairman's left. A retired G.P., Frank Arrowsmith had the confidence of a man who, throughout his life, had found it easy to charm women. He may not have been a particularly clever doctor, but he was always a popular one. Now he sat back at ease in his high-backed, leather-seated chair, listened to tales of distress with

a faint smile of amusement, and imposed fines, or brief terms of imprisonment, in the soft, reasonable voice he had used to recommend a course of antibiotics or a fat free diet. On the other side of the chairman sat Gordon Burt, a prosperous garage owner whose skin and clothes hung loosely about his body in greyish folds, giving this squat man, Margery often thought, the appearance of a baby elephant. The first time the comparison had occurred to her she had giggled.

The new Magistrates Court in Boltingly was built of glass and concrete. Inside there was a pervasive smell of furniture polish and disinfectant, and the air conditioning hummed in a soporific fashion. During the first batch of cases, Margery's attention wandered. She thought of Tim in his office, accepting a cup of coffee from Charlotte, his inevitable researcher. Charlotte, naturally, was everything Margery wasn't, young, slender, intelligent, the possessor of a First in PPE from Lady Margaret Hall, the owner of a "super little Lotus Elan" which she could drive with skill at speeds Margery could never manage. A girl who, as Tim frequently told her, "knew her opera" as Margery never would, although whether the world of opera be-

longed to Charlotte and no one else, or whether the talented researcher had a private opera of her own, Margery had only once asked, to be met with a look of contempt. Charlotte, she knew perfectly well, was someone to whom Tim made love with greedy haste during lengthy lunch hours or late night sittings. She would never become Charlie, or even Lottie, although Margery had quickly been demoted to Marge or Jerry and, for some years now, to Margerine.

"If the bench pleases, may I mention the separation order made in this court?" she heard a solicitor ask in respectful tones, as though from a long way off. Why hadn't she separated from Tim, or even divorced him? He was never tired of telling her that any hint of a broken marriage in the Ministry of the Family would severely "embarrass the government," as though she cared how embarrassed the government became. When he said this, half threateningly, half in pathetic entreaty, she nursed her ever-increasing dislike in silence. Why should she separate from him and move out of the house and away from the garden she loved, to live in a rented flat in Boltingly and haggle over her maintenance, as the couple were going to haggle now in

court in front of her? The story of her marriage would, she knew, have some ending, but not that one. So far as Tim Oldroyd, MP, was concerned, she thought, separation was far too good for him.

"This is the murder," Dr. Arrowsmith smiled and whispered, calling for attention in the way a bridge player might remind her, "Your deal, partner." It was the big event in the Boltingly magistrates' day, *R. v. Mustoe*, a committal in a murder trial. Margery picked up her pencil and gave the case her full attention.

The man who had been led into the dock, guarded by two prison officers, looked puzzled. He wore jeans and an anorak, and he stared around the court as though he wasn't sure of its reality, or whether he was in a dream. He had brown curling hair that he wore rather long, and he had, Margery noticed, delicate hands with tapering fingers. He seemed, on the whole, to be taking little interest in the proceedings.

"Mr. Mustoe and his common-law wife Louise had been separated for some six months. She was living in a mobile home up by Boltingly Meadows, and he was sleeping, as he told the officer in charge of the case, 'rough.' Apparently he

had reason to believe she had formed a relationship with a man working on the new super-highway. Er . . . um . . .” The young man from the Crown Prosecution Service shuffled his papers nervously and cleared his throat. He looked hot and uncomfortable. What’s he worrying about? Margery wondered. This was only a preliminary hearing. He had nothing to do but call a few witnesses to show that there was a case sufficient to send up to the Crown Court. Mr. Mustoe’s solicitor, a lined and yellowing old professional who spent every day in some local criminal court, closed his eyes, leant back, and offered no assistance.

“On the night of the twelfth of April,” the prosecutor resumed uncertainly, “Mr. Mustoe was seen by several witnesses approaching the mobile home. He hammered on the door and was finally let in. Witnesses later heard sounds of quarrelling. We don’t know what time Mr. Mustoe left, but in the morning Louisa Rollins’ partner, who had been away for several days, returned and found her dead. The cause of death—you will hear the doctor’s evidence—was manual strangulation. Certain fingerprints . . .”

“Not admitted!” the old professional boomed without get-

ting to his feet, and the young man from the Crown Prosecution Service subsided meekly.

“Yes?” Dr. Arrowsmith raised his eyebrows at the old professional, who now rose, his hands clasped together on his stomach, and boomed again, “The fingerprints are not admitted. I shall be cross-examining the officer.”

“But the manual strangulation,” the retired doctor probed gently. “Is that admitted?”

“Oh yes, sir. We admit manual strangulation. By *somebody*.”

Gazing vaguely round the court, Mr. Mustoe, the man accused, caught Margery’s eye, and for no particular reason, smiled at her.

“Such amateurs, these criminals! I believe they want to be caught. Why didn’t that fellow Mustoe take the precaution of learning a little basic anatomy?” At half past four the committal proceedings had been adjourned until the following Monday. Mr. Mustoe was remanded in custody, and the magistrates retired to their room to enjoy their statutory tea and biscuits before dispersing. Dr. Arrowsmith stretched out his long, well-tailored legs and sipped the watery Lapsang of which he brought his own supply. “I’m not going to ruin

the lining of my stomach with the prison officers' Indian you could stand a spoon up in," he always said.

"Anatomy?" Mr. Burt preferred the local brew. "How would that help him?"

"My dear Gordon, you might know all about second-hand cars, but you'd make a rotten murderer. The carotoid sinus is the place to find. Only a slight pressure needed, it wouldn't leave any bruising you'd notice, and the victim would lose consciousness and be in deep, deep trouble."

"Losing consciousness wouldn't be enough to kill anyone, though. This fellow Mustoe was out to kill her." Margery watched as the baby elephant spooned sugar into the prison officers' tea.

"Whether the victim came out alive would depend on the situation she was in. Or he. A small squeeze and they'd be helpless." The doctor had finished his chocolate biscuit and pulled out a silk handkerchief to wipe his fingers, on the backs of which Margery noticed small clusters of black hair. Hair came out from below his white, gold-linked shirt cuffs also, and encircled his wristwatch.

"Well, anyway." Mr. Burt sounded unconvinced. "Where are these carotoid whatever they are anyway?"

"Feel your neck. Gently now. Got the Adam's apple? Now on each side, little swellings . . . the carotoid sinuses."

Mr. Burt stirred his tea as Dr. Arrowsmith talked them through it, but Margery's fingers went to her neck, only a little creased by the years since she had been a student and met Tim. Now she had found the exact spot.

"I'm afraid this is rather a morbid sort of a conversation for teatime." The doctor chairman was smiling at her again. "No doubt it's a good thing for all of us that the criminal classes are so poorly educated. Now. Let's talk about something far more pleasant. How's your delightful garden, Margery? Don't I remember, when you were kind enough to have Serena and me over to dinner, your lovely white border? What was it that smelled so delicious?"

"That would have been the syringe, I think," Margery told him. "Thank you, yes. The garden's still beautiful."

That night the Oldroyds were invited to a dinner given by the Boltingly Chamber of Commerce, a black tie affair at which Tim was to make a speech and Margery would look up at him admiringly as he painted a rosy picture of the economic situation.

Tim got home early so he would have plenty of time to change. He was greeted on the stairs by Bagpiper, who appeared embarrassingly affectionate and shot, like a bullet, at his flies. He did his best to calm the dog and then ran himself a bath.

He and Charlotte had enjoyed lunch in an Italian place in Horseferry Road and then retired to a small hotel near Victoria Station that offered reduced prices for an afternoon. Charlotte was an olive-skinned girl with thick, wiry hair, not as pretty as he would have liked her to be, and she left a musky smell on him that he was anxious to wash away. He cherished the illusion that Margery knew nothing of the way he spent his afternoons.

Tim always enjoyed his bath and avoided hotels that only offered a shower. He lay back gratefully and turned the tap on with his toe. As the warm water caressed him, the years seemed to drift away, and he was back in his student days; he sang, as he once had at a dance; "I Can't Get No Satisfaction." The noise of the taps and his singing drowned the footsteps behind him. The strong fingers that closed on his neck were like those of a lover.

*

Margery had been back to the house earlier. Then she waited, at the end of the garden, until she heard Tim's car. When he had gone upstairs, she stood by the back door until she heard the bath water running. He's washing off the smell of Charlotte, was what she said to herself. Then she went shopping in Waitrose, taking care to talk to as many acquaintances as possible. When she returned to the house, Bagpiper was kicking up a high-pitched yapping fuss, and water was dripping down the stairs. She turned off the tap and telephoned a Dr. Helena Quinton who had taken over the practice of Dr. Arrowsmith, now retired. Then she walked into the garden. The smell of the syringas was sweet and heavy and produced, in her, thoughts of love.

Margery wasn't back in court until the following Monday, for the adjourned hearing of the Mustoe committal. She parked neatly in the space marked Magistrates Only and went up to their room. Gordon Burt was always late, but Dr. Arrowsmith was there in excellent time, drinking coffee and eating a digestive biscuit; the chocolate covered ones were reserved for teatime.

"Margery, dear. I am most terribly sorry." He stood and

spoke very gently, using his best bedside manner.

"Thank you. And thank you and Serena for your note."

"The funeral's tomorrow, isn't it? We'll be there, of course."

"That's kind."

"Helena Quinton said it must have been a sudden heart attack. The poor fellow was unconscious and then drowned. Of course, he'd been overworking terribly. Politics makes such terrible demands nowadays . . ."

"I blame myself."

"Why on earth?" The doctor's arm was round her shoulder. He was old, too old for work, but he had had, she knew, many mistresses and the smell of eau de cologne on his handkerchief was as strong as the smell of syringas.

"If only I hadn't gone shopping! If only I'd been there, in the house, when he came back."

"That's ridiculous."

"I felt something was wrong when I was in Waitrose. It must have been a kind of . . ."

"Telepathy?" the wise old doctor suggested.

"Yes."

"You two were very close. I know you were." There was a

small silence, and he squeezed her shoulder. "We must see more of you now. We mustn't let you be lonely."

He moved away from her, it seemed reluctantly, when the pachyderm Mr. Burt arrived in a hurry. He had also written a note and spoke softly to Margery, as though they were in church together.

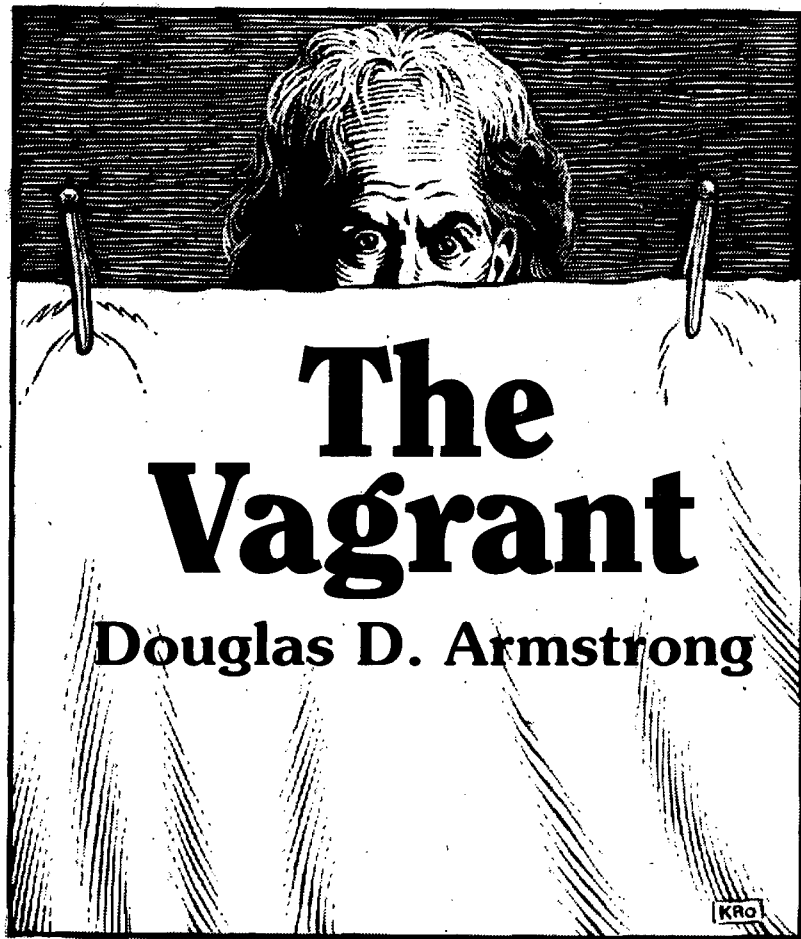
"The Mustoe case," Dr. Arrowsmith became business-like now that they were all assembled. "Now, I don't know what we're going to hear today, but the evidence is already overwhelming. I suppose there's no doubt we're sending him for trial?"

"No doubt at all." Gordon Burt's mouth was half full of digestive biscuit.

"Margery?"

"Oh, Tim always said I was to pay strict attention to what you said and follow your instructions. I must do that, he told me, for the sake of law and order."

She ran the last syllables together so they sounded like a woman's name, "Laura Nor-der." And as she said it, she couldn't suppress a giggle.



The yellowed letter turned up among my father's effects, its crude penmanship reviving a chill I was certain I'd shaken years ago. Harsh memories unexpectedly flooded back of a dark river that had crested in my heart and threatened me as a child with unimaginable evil. The envelope was postmarked October 10, 1948, and mailed with a three-cent commemorative red stamp honoring Clara Barton. It had arrived in our mailbox all

those years ago, misspellings and all. Even at age eight I had known where the double *n* fit in Cincinnati.

"I seen you," I read in the now faded ink before the poison letter dropped from my hands.

My father had chased him down the alley, out of view from my bedroom window where I stood trembling. He had made his way into our cellar that last time. Through the coal chute, my father suspected, which might explain why his eyes and teeth were about all I had seen in the darkness as he spoke to me in the gravelly voice that made hair I hadn't grown yet stand up.

At first he was just some vagrant who had taken up residence in our garage, scaring me half to death when he spoke from the shadows where he was lying on a ratty, soiled blanket, wearing his dark military jacket and his red hunting cap. "I seen him do it," he told me before the sound of my own screaming drowned out his voice.

I had run back into the house and straight to my room. By the time my father pushed back the heavy folding garage doors on their rusting tracks, he was gone, of course. I watched the end of the drama play out from my bedroom window, not certain what would happen next, as frightened for my father as I had been for myself, wondering why he didn't call the police instead of going cautiously into that garage with a length of pipe.

I had heard my father's voice on the stairs around the corner from the kitchen when he returned full of bravado and reassurance.

"The boy does have a vivid imagination."

"You heard the scream," my mother said.

"Yes, you're right. It might have been a vagrant. Anyway, he's gone, if he ever existed."

Oh, he existed all right. No one bothered trying to deny that after the letter arrived two days later, postmarked in Covington, Kentucky, across the river. I looked at the envelope and wondered why some kid was writing to my father. It was thick with only the single, folded page that my father pulled from it.

The curse he uttered was the first and last profanity ever to cross his lips in my presence. His hand tightened on the paper, and he crumpled it when my mother reached out for it. Her face was ashen with worry over the effect this unexpected stress was having on his irregular heartbeat, there being no way of knowing that his crippled pump would not let him down for another forty-six years.

Adults were entitled to many secrets back then. Their world was a place where children were merely special visitors to outer rooms in which the sunlight was filtered through lace curtains carefully arranged on the windows of life. The contents of Father's letter were never shared, not even with Mother, but it quickly became apparent from the questions he put to me in private that the note and my encounter with the vagrant had something in common.

That summer, a river turtle also wandered into our yard. The huge, angry, prehistoric creature chewed chunks from a rake handle that we used to try to prod it back toward its abandoned habitat. It was as if the ornery critter had come to stay. Smaller turtles had made similar confused pilgrimages before it, snapping turtles we called them, though I think now that it was just one of those colloquialisms we kids tossed around loosely. Later I came to wonder whether the old turtle was as large as it seemed at the time; the family bungalow had shrunk to the size of a cottage in the years after we moved on. But from the cowering respect I remember the men in the neighborhood showed the creature that day, I'm certain it was immense.

Uncle Matt had ruined a golf club on it. The mashie distracted the reptile while some men in the neighborhood put a net over it and slung it onto the back of a truck with an awful thud. Then they hauled it back to the river where it belonged.

My uncle's presence made it more of an occasion. He didn't come around very often, our place offering too little excitement to suit him. He also knew my mother didn't approve of what she called his ways. Father could be counted on to mount a staunch defense of Uncle Matt as a veteran entitled to make up for some of the fun he missed defending our freedom in the Pacific.

"Tell me, Mark, exactly how much drinking and carousing does two years of KP on a tropical island entitle a man to?" Mother wanted to know.

The blood connection between my uncle and my father was in some ways stronger than the marital bond between my parents. It superseded the obvious differences between the brothers, for sure. At least they were obvious to me. Frankly, I never saw the similarities everyone remarked about between those so-called Irish twins until the two had advanced into old age. Sure, there was a genetic imprint apparent around their eyes and mouths when they were in their prime. But it didn't really hit me until a morning many years later when my uncle made one of his rare overnight visits

as a houseguest and I realized I could not be sure which brother was sitting quietly in the shadows of my parents' kitchen at dawn, hunched over a cup of coffee.

As a kid, all I noticed was the differences. My father's lanky body had gone soft behind a desk, where he was sent to be safe from what doctors called the murmur. Uncle Matt was the flamboyant, physical one, even if he was living with Grandma until, as my father put it, he was back on his feet. I liked it when he picked me up in those strong, hard arms and whirled me around. There was an electricity about him. It was no surprise that he took charge of capturing the turtle.

The vagrant made another scary visit around that time, materializing on the other side of a bedsheet in our back yard as mother took the wash down from the line. She was startled, she said, but she had had the composure to listen for a moment before sticking the wicker laundry basket into the stranger's dirty hands and fleeing into the house.

"Mark," she said angrily, after dragooning my father from his office at midday for a bedroom tête-à-tête. I was a silent eavesdropper. "He says he saw you murder some woman, and he wants to know if we have the cash together yet."

My father's reply was in the soothe-a-hysterical-woman tone he sometimes used with Mother. "It's just the rantings of some lunatic, Helen."

Mother was unconvinced. "Maybe so, but I've seen him. He's dangerous."

My own father, accused of murder by a dangerous madman? Little wonder my heart practically stopped when that gravelly voice came at me again days later out of the blackness of our cellar. "I seen him," it said. "I seen him do it."

I was forbidden by my father to tell my friends. Yet word got around, and a few of Mother's piano students found excuses to drop out of weekly lessons rather than run the risk of encountering the boogieman haunting our house.

I had trouble sleeping, nightly shadows taking threatening shapes on the walls. For a time I refused chores that involved going to the basement. And my mother didn't make an issue of it.

I'm not certain exactly how much later it happened. But the sudden departure of the mysterious vagrant did nothing to produce the blissful sense of relief I so desired.

The detective was a plainclothes officer. I couldn't take my eyes off the pistol grip that bulged from the holster in a black leather strap that his coat slid back to reveal. He looked too big for our sofa, and his questions produced startling lies from my parents' mouths.

"But your neighbors saw him around your house," the detective said.

My father, whose hairline glistened with beads of perspiration, developed a vague recollection after looking again at the pictures of the body that had been fished from the Ohio River near Ludlow. "He might be the bum we roused from our garage," he agreed.

"This was found on him." The policeman produced a scrap of paper that was gray with printing on both sides. It appeared to have been ripped from a phone book. Something was circled in pen.

I thought my father had been stricken. He clutched his chest and folded at the waist like a deck chair. My mother shrieked. The policeman lifted an eyebrow.

After a brief commotion, my father recovered. "I swear to you, officer," he gasped, "we do not know this man."

"Now, could you please leave us be," my mother pleaded. "This is aggravating my husband's heart condition."

That was not the end of it, of course. Far from it. I could not understand why the letter went unmentioned along with the vagrant's wicked accusation against my father and his talk of money when the alternative was interrogations and a visit to the morgue. Unless, unless . . .

The letter. I picked it up again. "I seen you. You kilt her with that skarf. Now you gotta pay. \$1,000. Get the dough or get fingerd. No cops. Somboddy mite get hurt. Just like that hooker in Manila. Savy?"

Calamity was the word my father used when the policeman left. And now, almost half a century later with the letter in my hands, I thought I finally understood exactly for whom.

Uncle Matt's room in East Chicago, Indiana, was in a dingy, low-rent, walk-up district. I waited four days across the street for him at a diner, filling the ashtrays, emptying coffee cups, and scanning words in the papers. Uncle Matt had taken up motorcycles after the printing company bribed him into early retirement at age sixty. He spent his days cruising two-lane highways and honky-tonk saloons on his Milwaukee Iron in the company of

young Neanderthals tattooed with names like Sonny and Bull on any patch of skin that showed through the hair.

When Uncle Matt finally returned, he ushered me into a room that was musty and without sentiment. No pictures. No souvenirs. Just secondhand furniture and dark, faded wallpaper. And a liquor cabinet. "Drink?" he suggested. The unexpected arrival of his nephew, who also was his late brother's executor, seemed to precipitate a certain unjustified anticipation. That changed when I asked him if he remembered the vagrant. Something hard and cold in his gray-blue eyes frisked me, searching for just how much I knew.

"Best to leave some things alone, Chuck," he said eventually. He chugged a shot of Jack Daniel's and poured himself another. Uncle Matt frightened me a little now that I was older and his youthful flamboyance had turned to brittle, ambiguous intensity. I looked at those once-powerful arms in which I had long ago put my faith and trust, not exactly sure what he might do with them next.

He folded them across his black T-shirt. "We've all been through a lot lately," he said. "You just let the dust settle a little now."

I handed him a photocopy of the letter. His shoulders stiffened when he read it. "Damn," he muttered quietly. I watched his every move, grateful I'd clicked the safety off my pistol. He didn't seem to want to talk. So I did.

"That vagrant thought my father was you, didn't he? He found us because we were listed in the directory and you weren't. You and my dad. Same initials. Same general appearance. My father understood it as soon as the letter arrived. And he suffered terribly because of it. We all did, because of what you'd done. But my father also went to you about it, didn't he? He told you we were being blackmailed for something you did, and so you murdered again."

Uncle Matt ran his fingers through his steel-wool hair and looked into my eyes. "Don't you ever go off duty?" he asked. I let that pass. So he tried another tack. "You like being a cop, don't you?"

What the hell. "Yes, I do."

"I didn't," he said.

"What? You gonna try to tell me now you were military police?"

"O.S.S. Military intelligence. Dirty work. Rooting out counterespionage agents. Japs stashed them everywhere. Don't make judgments unless you were there. It wasn't street punks and squad cars."

"I take that as an admission."

"Take it any way you like. What that lunatic came around your place threatening to expose was an act of war. Pure and simple. That guy was one sandwich short of a picnic, you know. And eleven months in a Jap POW camp didn't do much to unscramble his brains."

This disgusted me. I said, "So he was a loose end that you didn't mind terminating, with prejudice." I hoped he would make a move on me. Give me the justification. My blood boiled.

He quietly took another sip of his drink. "I'm an old man. I should let you believe what you want, even if you do plan to arrest me for a fifty-year-old murder I didn't commit. But like cops in general, Chuck, you irritate the hell out of me with your arrogance. So maybe I should just tell you because you won't like it."

I waited while he struck a pose, propping his boot on the arm of a soiled easy chair. I responded with my own look of determination. The silence hung there between us.

"My daddy didn't kill him," I said firmly.

A smile spread across Uncle Matt's face that truly irked me. Four days of caffeine and nicotine had corroded my better nature. I kicked the drink out of his hand, made a lunge at him, and shot a roundhouse right at him that grazed his jaw. We tumbled onto the floor, a jumble of flying elbows, knuckles, knees, and fingernails.

I let up immediately when I felt the gun being pressed into the soft flesh under my jaw. Uncle Matt had a wild look in his eyes. I didn't move.

He was out of breath, trembling beneath me. "You should use your head a little more, Chuck, and your emotions less."

I got off him. Slowly. He sprang up, keeping the gun trained on my head. He was surprisingly spry. It was my gun in his hands.

"The safety's off," I cautioned him.

"I noticed. Planning to shoot me, were you?"

I looked at his worn carpet.

"Your daddy should have destroyed that letter," he said, sounding bitter. "I guess he musta hung onto it as insurance. Makes sense. It shifts the blame pretty squarely onto me."

I felt startled. "What are you saying?"

"Let it go, Chuck. I'm telling you, just walk away from this. It's all in the past."

He could read in my expression that I could not, that the disloyal and distressing idea that my father had killed a man had nagged at me since childhood.

"No, your daddy didn't kill that pathetic cracker. But I'd have leapt to the same conclusion if your daddy hadn't come around screaming at me about what he thought I'd done. He was panicked over the hot water he was in."

I believed him. There was no extra sell, just the matter-of-fact denial. So somebody else bashed that crazy skull and pushed the unconscious tramp into the currents of the Ohio River to drown. But who, and why? Uncle Matt was watching my perplexed reaction with a look that said, all you have to do is ask.

"So who did kill him?"

I wanted to retrieve the words as soon as I had spoken them, reach out and grab them back out of that stale air. I wanted to put everything back, follow his advice, bury the matter, reseal the vault.

His manner softened.

"Your mother was convinced that all the stress was going to kill your father. It wasn't premeditated. It was pure impulsive hostility. He was some crazed madman who had latched onto her family, and he jumped out once too often."

"No!"

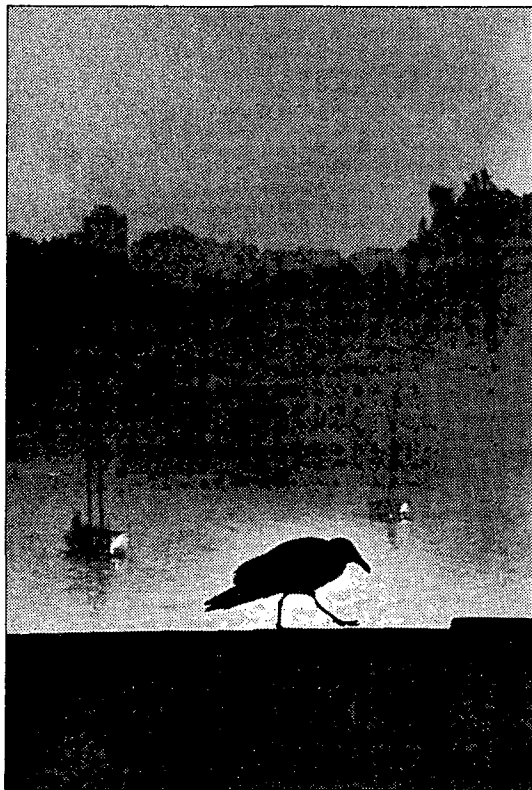
"She just happened to be holding a meat hammer. Opened up his skull pretty good. But your mom, she kept her cool. You remember that big old turtle we had to haul back to the river that summer? That idea was fresh in her mind about then."

"Please, enough. Enough."

I had been wrong about my father's deepest loyalties. If it had come to a choice of whom to protect, he was prepared to trade his brother's name and liberty for his wife's, once she admitted to him what she had done.

I considered that while holding my mother's bony, cool hand as she stared vacantly at a lamp, five years into the deepest mists of Alzheimer's in a Cincinnati nursing home. I scolded her aloud for her misguided, brutal act to protect my father's fragile heart. But deep down I was silently praying that beneath the veil of her closed-off world she was not reliving the nightmare of what happened all those years ago.

THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



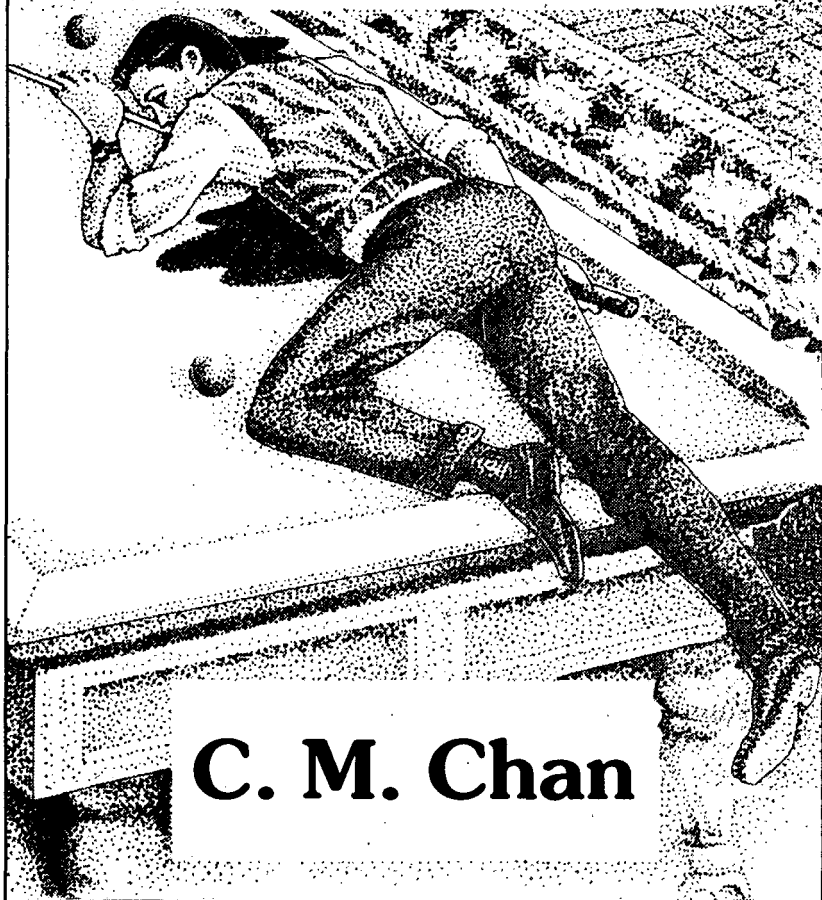
Ernst Haas, © 1967/Magnum Photos

Next stop, the pallid bust of Pallas. We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime), based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine, 1540 Broadway, New York, New York, 10036. Please label your entry "March Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit.

The winning entry for the November Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 157.

FICTION

MURDER AT ROKEBY HOUSE



C. M. Chan

Illustration by Joan Heausler

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“That’s torn it,” said Carrie Prendergast, slamming down the phone receiver.

Phillip Bethancourt, startled, looked round from where he sat in the window seat, smoking a leisurely cigarette and looking out on a perfect spring day. Beyond the window, a small knot of day-trippers were gathering on the terrace in preparation for the five o’clock tour of Rokeby House, one of the finest late Georgian manor houses in Norfolk. Bethancourt had been idly watching them assemble with an air of superiority, since he was not a tourist but a guest. Rokeby House was presently owned by his old school chum, Arnold Prendergast. The death of Arnold’s father two years ago and the resultant taxes were what had impelled Arnold to open the house to the public. The family had rallied round, moving en masse into the west wing and denuding their own rooms in order to cram all the family treasures into the rooms to be displayed. Since the family had been living on the estate for almost three hundred years and had been eagerly collecting and furnishing for most of that time, the treasures made quite an impressive show. Only a very few pieces

had been sold off to help with the death duties.

“And where,” wailed Carrie, addressing herself to the ceiling, “is Arnold? It’s really too bad of him to go off like this.”

Bethancourt considered her. She was Arnold’s sister, and until their meeting last night, Bethancourt had not seen her since she was twelve. She was twenty now, and he was much impressed with how she had grown.

“There didn’t seem,” he ventured, “to be anyone else available to pick your uncle up at the station.”

“Well, he should have been back by now,” said Carrie unforgivingly.

Bethancourt privately thought this unlikely. The station was at least half an hour’s drive away, and Arnold had left only twenty minutes ago.

“Mother’s gone off to that nursery,” continued Carrie, ticking off her family on her fingers, “Miss Chisleton’s in bed with a cold, Eric and Beryl are walking the dogs, I don’t know where Tom is, and now this. What a day.”

“May I be of some help?” asked Bethancourt politely.

Carrie eyed him calculatingly. “Of course!” she exclaimed. “Why didn’t I think of it before? You can give the tour.”

Bethancourt was considerably taken aback. "No, I can't," he said.

"Of course you can," she retorted. "I've simply got to go. That was Dr. Colton on the phone—Aunt Alice has fallen and broken something, and you know how flustered she gets."

"But I don't know anything about the house," protested Bethancourt while Carrie snatched up her purse.

"You know enough not to mix up Canaletto with Scott," she replied. "Here." She grabbed a brochure from the desk and thrust it at him. "There's a floor plan on the back—make sure you don't take them into any of the private rooms. Oh Lord! All the cars are out. I'll have to borrow yours."

With great reluctance, Bethancourt handed over the keys to his Jaguar.

"Thanks," said Carrie, beaming a megawatt smile at him briefly. "Don't worry. You'll do fine."

She was gone. Bethancourt looked down at the large Borzoi hound who was curled up by the empty fireplace.

"I think we're in trouble, Cerberus," he said.

The dog, hearing his name, thumped his tail sympathetically on the stone hearth. Bethancourt, turning his atten-

tion to the brochure, was relieved to see that it mentioned the highlights of each room. Still, since the tourists were also in possession of the brochure, it was incumbent upon him as the guide to come up with other points of interest. He checked his watch. It was already two minutes past five.

"You had better stay here, Cerberus," he said. With a sigh, he rose and went to meet his doom, brochure in hand.

As the height of the season was still more than a month away, only a handful of tourists were waiting. There were an older American couple, a pair of newlyweds from London on their honeymoon, two middle-aged sisters from Kent who had really come to see the gardens and were only taking the house tour because it was included in the price of admission, and a young, dark-haired man who looked like a motor mechanic and who volunteered nothing about himself.

Bethancourt started off well enough, leading them into the oak paneled hall and giving them a little speech about when and by whom the house was built and setting them to admire the parquet floor and the Adam staircase. But by the time they reached the drawing room, he was beginning to feel unequal to his task. He knew

enough about art and antiques to place things in their proper period and even to assign them to the appropriate artists, but he had no idea how they had come to be in the family's possession. He easily recognized the portraits of Arnold's parents, but he didn't know where Arnold's portrait (if there was one) was hung, nor did he have a clue as to who all the other portraits represented. He knew that Allenby was the founder's name and that Prendergast was the result of a generation of daughters, but he was astonished to discover that there had been a previous change of name in the mid-nineteenth century.

He felt that to simply tell the tourists he didn't know the answers to their questions was inappropriate, since they had already paid for the answers. Throwing caution to the winds, he began to embroider, and then to make up history out of whole cloth. By the time they reached the dining room, the home of several more portraits and the family plate, he was enjoying himself immensely, having made up a family history so scandalous that, had it been true, it is doubtful the Prendergasts would have survived in their present respectable incarnation.

Having described how Hepplewhite had remained to de-

sign the dining room furniture after the second Allenby daughter (portrait over the mantel) had jilted him, Bethancourt consulted the floor plan and shepherded his group toward the billiard room.

"This is the last room on the ground floor," he announced as he swung the door open. "It also holds the gun collect—"

He was cut short by a scream from the female half of the honeymoon couple and startled cries from the rest. Bethancourt himself had frozen, his hand still on the doorknob, his gaze riveted on the billiard table.

Sprawled across it was the body of a young man with his head battered in, his glazed eyes staring blankly at the door, his cheek nestled in a pool of blood that had turned the green baize black.

Swiftly Bethancourt pushed the others back and shut the door. He found that everyone was staring at him.

"I think," he said, rather shaken, "we should all go back to the office while I telephone for the police."

The next forty-five minutes were extremely awkward. The office was a small room off the main hall, and there were not enough seats for everyone. The American woman was afraid of

large dogs and let out a shriek upon seeing Cerberus that very nearly outdid the newlywed's scream over the body. Recklessly, Bethancourt pulled two of the Bradshaw tapestry armchairs in from the hall and stationed his dog outside the door. It was then that he realized the motor mechanic was missing. Swearing under his breath, he rang the police, somewhat hampered in his description of events by the fact that the others were hanging on his every word. He rang off and announced that they would have to await the arrival of the authorities. The Americans turned out to be mystery fans, and wild horses wouldn't have dragged them away, but they wanted to know when Scotland Yard would arrive and seemed affronted when Bethancourt told them it would only be the Norfolk C.I.D. Everyone else wanted to leave. Bethancourt had to make it clear that this was not on, at which point the newlywed wife started crying. The Kentish sisters suggested that they could wait in the garden and turned sullen when Bethancourt wouldn't let them. It would all have been easier if he could have offered them refreshment, but he didn't dare leave them on their own for long enough to fetch it.

*

Carrie and her aunt arrived back before the police. Carrie, having settled her aunt in the sitting room, looked harassed as she answered Bethancourt's summons. He broke the news as gently as he could, stepping out into the hall and closing the office door behind him for privacy. Cerberus looked up at them hopefully.

"My God," she said, stunned. She pushed her hair off her forehead, her eyes worried. "You say you don't know him, Phillip?" she asked anxiously.

"I didn't recognize him," said Bethancourt. "My first guess is that he might be one of the tourists."

Carrie's relief showed as irritation. "Then why the hell couldn't they murder him at *their* house?"

"I'm having to keep the others bottled up till the police arrive," said Bethancourt, ignoring this. "They're getting very fractious—" a vast understatement—"so do you think you could oblige with a brew up?"

"Oh, you poor thing," she said, laying a hand on his arm. "You must have been having a dreadful time. Of course I'll get the tea—and a bottle, too, I should think. I'll just have a look in the billiard room on my way."

"Don't touch anything," said Bethancourt uneasily. "And don't go in—just look from the door."

"I'll be good," she promised. "I just want to make sure it's nobody to do with us. After all, you don't know Alcock's help in the garden or the boy who brings up the groceries."

Bethancourt was still not entirely reassured, and he remained in the hall, watching her as she went toward the billiard room. But she was back in a moment, her face very white, her blue eyes wide with shock.

"Not a very pleasant sight, is he?" said Bethancourt sympathetically.

She sank down on one of the Bradshaw chairs. "It's Len," she said blankly.

Bethancourt was startled. "Len?" he repeated. "Who's Len?"

"Leonard Camden," she said carefully. "My fiancé."

Bethancourt, who hadn't known she was engaged, stared at her, at a loss for words.

"I'm sorry you've got let in for all this, Phillip."

Arnold Prendergast was still in his twenties, but he looked older. After his father's death, worry lines had seemed to appear on his face overnight, and although lately

Bethancourt had thought he was looking less anxious, the news of the murder had brought back all the original lines and more.

He was slouched now on the chintz sofa in the private sitting room, the posture contrasting oddly with the impeccable three-piece suit he had taken to wearing on tourist days. There was a glass of whisky on the end table at his side, but he had barely touched it.

It was very late. The police had finally left a half hour ago, and the rest of the family had retired to bed, still in shock and exhausted by the endless questioning.

"It's no trouble for me," said Bethancourt, polishing his glasses with his handkerchief. "You know what a murder fan I am. I'm only sorry that it turned out to be Carrie's fiancé instead of some nice, anonymous stranger."

Arnold frowned. "I'm not," he said abruptly. "And I rather doubt anyone else is. Even Carrie."

Bethancourt replaced his glasses on his nose and raised an eyebrow. He had already noticed that Carrie was suffering more from shock than from grief and that the other members of the family—whom he had always found to be kindly

people—seemed more worried than regretful.

"Len wasn't generally well-liked, then?" he asked.

"That's putting it mildly," answered Arnold. "Mother nearly had a fit. She absolutely forbade Carrie to marry him, but of course that did more harm than good. It only put Carrie's back up. She can be very headstrong, you know."

"But what was so awful about him?"

"Well," Arnold ran his hand through his hair, "it's hard to say, really."

"Common?" suggested Bethancourt.

"Oh, very. But I don't expect that would have mattered to anyone. No, it was more that he was, well, sly. Secretive, and rather cold, as if he were always looking for some sort of angle."

"So why did Carrie want to marry this complete wart?"

Arnold looked surprised. "He was rich," he answered simply. "Carrie was trying to do her bit for the old homestead. I suppose," he added reflectively, "that was Mother's real objection. She wouldn't have cared how awful he was if Carrie really loved him. But the rest of us couldn't stick him. We were all dreading the day they actually got married and he moved in."

It was Bethancourt's turn to be surprised. "They were going to live at Rokeby?"

"Well, of course, old chap. Len's money wouldn't do us much good if he was spending it elsewhere, would it?" Arnold hesitated. "I rather think he was hinting that I should move out of the master suite and let them have it. He was that sort."

Bethancourt ignored this last comment. "You don't think Len had made a will, do you?" he asked uneasily.

"A will?" Arnold looked puzzled. "Well, I shouldn't have thought so. He didn't seem to me to be the kind of person who thought much about the future. Why?"

"Oh, no reason," said Bethancourt vaguely. He busied himself with lighting a cigarette. "Look here, Arnold," he said in a moment, "all this is damned awkward. I think perhaps I'd better take myself off tomorrow morning—the others won't want an outsider looking on while the police push all their little secrets out into the light of day."

"No, don't go," began Arnold, and then he stopped and reddened. "I'm sorry," he said. "I can see you'd rather be out of it."

"It's not that," answered Bethancourt, examining the glowing tip of his cigarette

with great care. "Aside from considerations of delicacy, I'm afraid I don't really approve of hitting people over the head and killing them. Especially not when it leaves the rest of your family under suspicion. I'm on the wrong side here, Arnold."

"But that's just it," burst out his friend. "We can't live forever wondering which of us did the man in. Much as I loathe the thought of seeing one of my family in the dock, it would be better than watching us all disintegrate into separate islands because we can't trust each other any more. And Rokeby needs us all—I couldn't carry on here if I had to hire people to do all the things the family does now." He shook his head.

"Well, if that's how you feel about it," said Bethancourt, "I'll stay on till Monday as we'd planned as long as no one else objects. But feel free to give me the heave-ho if you think it's better."

"Thank you, Phillip," said Arnold. "I just hope it's all cleared up quickly."

"Take heart," said Bethancourt. "The police are very good at their job."

Detective Chief Inspector Sam Kennick sat in his office at C.I.D. headquarters in Nor-

wich and stared down at the photographs of Leonard Camden's body. Kennick was a small, thin man with a quiet demeanor and brown eyes that missed nothing. He was, indeed, very good at his job, but he was not feeling very clever as he focused tired eyes on the photographs. Camden had apparently been leaning over the billiard table to make a shot when someone had come up behind him and hit him on the head with a rifle butt. The assailant had struck him again, pretty well crushing the left side of the skull, then dropped the rifle on the floor and left, presumably by the small back door at the end of the hall next to the billiard room. It had been open, although all the Prendergasts agreed it ought to have been locked. However, they had also agreed that it was frequently overlooked. This had occurred no more than an hour or two before his body was found at five thirty.

Since Camden had been shooting pool, Kennick had surmised that his murderer must have been his playing partner, but that idea had been scotched by the Prendergasts, who all said Camden had a habit of going off alone to shoot practice shots, since none of them were very good players.

Kennick's gaze turned to the statements he and his sergeant had spent the evening taking from the Prendergasts. The two scions of the family lived at Rokeby House with Mrs. Emily Prendergast: her son Arnold, who had inherited the estate, and her daughter Carrie. They were joined by James, the late owner's brother, and his family, which included his wife Alice, and two sons, Eric and Thomas. In addition there was Eric's wife Beryl. On one thing they were all agreed: no one had expected Leonard Camden at Rokeby this weekend. Since his engagement to Carrie Prendergast two months before, he had often spent weekends in Norfolk, but no arrangement had been made for this weekend, and when Carrie had spoken to him by phone on Thursday, he had made no mention of plans to leave London. Indeed, he had asked her to come up to town, but she had refused, since her brother had invited a houseguest and she had wanted to take over the house tours Arnold usually gave.

Kennick shook his head. He didn't like this case, and even less was he going to like the sort of headlines that were sure to appear tomorrow when the press discovered a man had been murdered on an antique billiard table in a historic home

and that the members of one of the most respectable families in Norfolk were the prime suspects. Thank God that Arnold Prendergast, the present head of the family, appeared to be out of it. He had had tea at three thirty with his sister Carrie; his houseguest, Phillip Bethancourt; his aunt, Alice Prendergast; her son Eric; and Eric's wife, Lady Beryl. Thomas, Alice's second son, had come in late from giving the three o'clock house tour.

After tea, Arnold and Bethancourt had gone out to look at a summerhouse on the property that Arnold hoped to restore. At about four forty they had returned to the garage, where Arnold had taken out a car to go pick up his uncle, James Prendergast, at the train station. Bethancourt had seen him go and had then returned to the house, where he wound up giving the five o'clock tour.

Several people had seen Arnold arrive at the station, had seen him waiting in his Rover in the car park, and had seen him drive off with his uncle after the London train had come in. Arnold's time seemed well-accounted for.

His uncle was a different matter. At first Kennick had been relieved to discover that James Prendergast had taken the nine oh-six A.M. train to

London, stayed there all day, and not returned until five eleven. Unfortunately, he hadn't. His son Thomas had dropped him off that morning, but the stationmaster was quite sure he hadn't seen Mr. James Prendergast all day. The ticket collector was equally certain James had not gotten off the five eleven from London that afternoon. There was nothing for it but for Kennick to return to Rokeby tomorrow, call James a liar, and demand to know where he had been. Kennick wasn't looking forward to it. The Prendergasts were well-known and well-liked in the district, but if any of them could be accused of high-handedness, it was James.

Unlike her husband's, Alice Prendergast's alibi checked out. After tea, she and her daughter-in-law, Lady Beryl, had cleared up, and Alice had taken a car into the village to do some shopping. Coming out of the post office, she had slipped and fractured her ankle and had had to be taken round to Dr. Colton's surgery.

Mrs. Emily Prendergast, Arnold's mother, had left after lunch to drive to a nursery half-way across Norfolk where they had some new breed of tea rose she was interested in. Mrs. Emily was known to be both de-

lightfully charming and absolutely scatty; the drive had taken her nearly twice the time needed because she had gotten lost, but the nursery owner confirmed that she had arrived shortly before three and left not long past three thirty. Anyone else would have been back at Rokeby by four thirty at the latest, but Mrs. Emily had not arrived until after six. She had, she said, stopped for tea at a delightful little place in an unnamed village, and had afterwards lost her way again and ended up by a lovely field where she had stopped to pick wild-flowers. Getting lost was to Mrs. Emily a regular feature of any trip she took, and she enjoyed it as much as any other part of a journey.

Kennick did not seriously think Mrs. Emily could have murdered anyone, but it was a fact that her time was not accounted for. He would have to try to find that cafe.

The rest of the family had no alibis at all.

Thomas Prendergast, who was trained in estate management, had taken himself off after tea to the manager's office above the stables and had remained working there alone until he returned to the house at six.

Eric and his wife, Lady Beryl, had gone to walk the

dogs. This was an activity the family took in turns to do on days when the estate was open to the public. The Prendergasts had quickly found that some people found it necessary to investigate forbidden paths and to try to get into parts of the house not on the tour. The dogs had turned up quite a few of these miscreants over the years, but none had been found today. In order to cover as much ground as possible, Eric and Beryl had split up, meeting each other at the gates at about five thirty. Both explained that they had lingered over their task because it had been such a fine day. Either, reflected Kennick, could have seen Camden arriving, followed him back to the house, and killed him.

And then there was Carrie Prendergast, his prime suspect. Kennick sighed heavily and took a gulp of coffee without noticing it had grown cold. Carrie had left tea early, five minutes or so after Thomas had come in, so as not to leave the tour office empty for too long. The family had been taking turns at keeping the place staffed all day, doing double duty to make up for the lack of their usual office volunteer, Miss Chisleton, who was in bed with a cold.

So from about three fifty until Bethancourt had gone to the

office at about four fifty-five, Carrie's time was unaccounted for. She had had the closest relationship with the dead man, and they had only her word that Camden hadn't meant to come to Rokeby this weekend. And she had certainly not appeared grief-stricken at the demise of her intended.

The trouble was, neither had the rest of the family. They had been shocked, yes; unhappy, no.

With some relief, Kennick turned to the rest of the statements collected and the wonderfully mysterious young man who had departed so precipitously. The police hadn't managed to pick him up and probably wouldn't; the only thing that made it even remotely possible was that one of the other tourists had noticed his car and part of the registration plate number. This Bethancourt had the impression the stranger might have been a motor mechanic, and after some reflection had finally brought out of his memory the fact that the man's hands and fingernails were stained with oil.

Phillip Bethancourt himself did not seem a very likely suspect. He had been at school with Arnold Prendergast, but had not been to visit Rokeby in almost eighteen months, contenting himself with putting

Arnold up at his flat in London on the latter's rare visits. So he was not very involved with the family. On the other hand, it had taken him fifteen minutes to make the five minute walk from the garage to the house, and it was possible he had known Camden in London.

Then there was Richard Alcock, the gardener. He claimed to be in his nineties, but the Prendergasts assured Kennick he couldn't possibly be more than eighty and was more likely seventy-five. In any case, he had lost most of his teeth and had not bothered today with the dentures provided him by the National Health. It was therefore almost impossible to make out anything he said. The general gist of his information was that he had stayed in the garden keeping a watchful eye on the tourists and making certain they didn't pick the flowers. The tourists had attested to seeing him from time to time, usually glaring at them from a distance, but these sporadic appearances by no means gave him an alibi. Still, he had barely seemed to know who Leonard Camden was. The name made no impression on him whatever, and it was not until the victim was referred to as "Miss Carrie's fiancé" that Alcock seemed to understand who they were talking about.

He had then expressed sympathy for Miss Carrie but had little more to say.

The tourists had been principally outraged at being interrogated, with the exception of the Americans, who had wanted to know when Scotland Yard was coming. They were Dick and Betty MacDonald, and Kennick was inclined to exonerate them. Their passports showed that they had been in the country only a few days, and their plane tickets announced that they meant to leave on Monday. They had never been in England before and knew no one here; they were just a couple of happy tourists who had retired early and were enjoying a bit of travel with the fruits of their labors.

Norah and Sarah Elkston were extremely sorry they had decided to take in the house at all, since they were principally interested in the garden, and they repeated this sentiment firmly over and over again as if a lack of interest in the house would absolve them of murder. Kennick had already checked them out by a phone call to the constable of their village in Kent, where the Misses Elkston were well-known. They lived, according to the constable, very carefully within their somewhat slender means, devoting their time to their gar-

den, which was deservedly famous in the village. The constable could not recall their ever going to London or to Norfolk before this, although they usually managed a short trip once a year to view other gardens. Last year's trip had been to Somerset, if he remembered correctly. The only visitor he ever recalled their having was a niece who lived in Canterbury.

Rick and Barbara Morris, the newlyweds, were harder to check out. Kennick's sergeant had managed to contact their landlady, who had confirmed that they had taken her first floor flat, but that had been only a fortnight ago. She understood that they had gotten married last weekend and although they had moved in a few belongings the week before, they had only stayed the Saturday night before leaving on Sunday for their honeymoon.

This was fine as far as it went, but that wasn't very far and Kennick knew he was going to have to do some very tedious work to try to make sure they hadn't known the dead man.

Unless he could solve the case before that became necessary.

Kennick sighed again. He knew perfectly well one of the Prendergasts had probably

murdered Camden, but he was having a great deal of trouble believing it of them. He was from that part of Norfolk himself, and although he had no personal connection with the family, he had known of them all his life and had always heard them spoken of as decent Christian people—the sort who were the backbone of England. He was going to have to screw his courage to the sticking point and try to erase this bias from his mind.

A knock on the door heralded the arrival of Kennick's sergeant, Brown, who unexpectedly introduced a second man into the office.

"This is Wilson, sir, from Traffic Division."

"Ah yes." Kennick tried to look as if he were not utterly bewildered by the appearance of Traffic Division.

"Wilson thinks he may have your mystery tourist," said Brown.

"Yes, sir," said Wilson. "I pulled over a dark blue Cortina with a London number at five fifty this afternoon. Had her up to eighty, he did."

"Does the description fit?" asked Kennick eagerly.

"Yes, sir." Wilson nodded. "Dark-haired man in his early twenties, skinny. He seemed quite nervous, but a lot of people are when they're caught

speeding like that. I've written down the information from his license for you. His name's Joe Crowley."

"Good work, Wilson," said Kennick, taking the proffered paper. "This is going to help our case no end. I hope to God," he added, after a highly gratified Wilson had left, "this really is the man. No matter whom we identify as the murderer, any barrister could get him off so long as there's an unknown man in the picture. We'll have to get that Bethancourt chap to identify him. How have you been coming along, Brown?"

"I've hit a snag, sir," answered Brown, seating himself on the other side of the desk and producing his notebook. "That brokerage firm where Miss Prendergast said Camden worked? Well, I got hold of the director, and he's never heard of Leonard Camden. Said he was quite sure they'd never employed anyone by that name."

Kennick was frowning. "That opens a whole new can of worms," he said. "Did Carrie Prendergast lie, or was she lied to?"

"I think perhaps she was lied to, sir," offered Brown. "I noticed that Camden's driver's license was only issued six weeks ago, and that made me curious. So I rang up his landlord, who said Camden's only lived in

that flat for just over two months."

"I see. Well, it looks rather as if Camden was somebody else before he decided to marry Carrie Prendergast." Kennick turned back to her statement. "She says she met him in a nightclub about four months ago."

Brown coughed diffidently. "If they got engaged two months ago, she must have visited his previous address."

"I expect so," agreed Kennick. "We'll ask her tomorrow." He sighed. He really wasn't looking forward to returning to Rokeby. "Let's call it a night," he said. "We'll have a full day tomorrow, and we'd better start early."

"Yes, sir," said Brown, with relief. He had none of his superior's prejudices concerning the Prendergasts, but he was at least as tired as the chief inspector and had been thinking of his bed for the last two hours. He was glad Kennick hadn't decided to pull an all-nighter.

It was rather difficult, Bethancourt found, to have a group of one's friends suspected of murder. In previous cases he had always attached himself to his friend, Detective Sergeant Jack Gibbons of New Scotland Yard, and so had come to the investi-

gation and those involved with a refreshing lack of prejudice. In theory, having his friends as the chief suspects should have given him additional insight, but he did not find it so in practice. He knew nothing about any of these people that would lead him to believe one of them was capable of murder.

So he sat at breakfast that Sunday morning thinking about blackmail. It was a grey, misty day, holding the promise of rain, and the Prendergast family had taken this as an excuse not to go to church. They were all very subdued and rather unhappy-looking, all except Arnold's mother, who was chatting comfortably about the roses she had seen yesterday. Uncle James had excused himself to take tea up to his wife, who was lying in her room with her ankle propped up. Eric, the eldest of the children and a rather stodgy personality, had barricaded himself behind the *Sunday Times* while his wife Beryl replied with a divided attention to Emily's rose conversation. Carrie had come down rather late and sat hunched over her coffee at the opposite end of the table from her mother. Tom had tried to interest her in the crossword but had given up the attempt, and Arnold was eating briskly, keeping his eyes on his plate.

Bethancourt, who never ate much breakfast, was sipping coffee and considering which of them was most likely to be blackmailed. He could not believe any of them would have killed Camden simply to prevent Carrie from marrying him. By all accounts, Camden had been an unscrupulous sort, not the kind of man who would be above blackmail. If he had dug up something nasty about one of the Prendergasts, said Prendergast might have killed him rather than pay up.

This theory, to Bethancourt's mind, favored Thomas Prendergast, the younger of James and Alice's sons. He gazed pensively at the young man, who was buttering a piece of toast. Tom was two years Bethancourt's junior. He had foregone a university education in favor of studying estate management and had made quite a success of it. He was Bethancourt's prime candidate for blackmail because of his position as manager of the Rokeby estate. If he was taking a little personal profit off the meager estate income and Camden had found out about it, it would provide not only excellent blackmail material but also the means of paying it. The problem with blackmailing any other member of the family was that they had nothing to pay with.

Of course, reflected Bethancourt, Camden might not have known that. If Carrie was marrying the man for his money, she might not have revealed the full glory of the Prendergast penury. In which case, the blackmailed Prendergast would have no choice but to murder, since they could not possibly pay up.

"Well," said Beryl, glancing out the window, "at least there won't be many tourists if it comes on to rain."

Her husband snorted into his paper. "You must be joking," he said. "They'll be out in droves to see—well, you know how people are," he ended lamely, glancing at Carrie.

"There won't be any tourists," said Arnold firmly. "I'm not opening the estate."

"Quite right, dear," said his mother. "We can't have people tramping about when there's been a death in the house."

"I'll make up a sign after breakfast," said Tom, "and put it up on the gate."

"I'll give you a hand," offered Beryl. "I think there's some of that blue paint left."

Carrie rose. "I'll do kitchen duty, since Aunt Alice is laid up," she said, and began to gather up empty plates.

"Oh," said Beryl, "I didn't mean to leave you with that. I can perfectly well—"

"No," said Carrie, a little desperately, "really, I'd rather."

"Well, if you're sure," said Beryl, eyeing her doubtfully.

"Quite," answered Carrie and escaped into the kitchen.

"It will be better for her to have something to do," Emily told Beryl. "It's all extremely unfortunate, but I suppose we must be grateful she hadn't already married him."

"I suppose so," said Beryl, who was not at all sure what Emily meant by the remark. She drained her coffee cup. "I'd better go look for that paint."

Tom left with her, and in another moment Eric took his paper off to the library. Arnold was trying to dissuade his mother from buying expensive rosebushes. Unobtrusively Bethancourt rose, collected some cups and saucers, and went into the kitchen.

The stone-flagged kitchen was enormous, an odd contrast between eighteenth century solidity and modern convenience. Carrie had left the dishes in the sink and was sitting by the huge fireplace, staring blankly at the cold ashes. She looked round at the noise Bethancourt made in setting down the crockery.

"Oh," she said. "It's you, Phillip."

"Yes," admitted Bethancourt, "it is. I came out to help."

"Thanks," she answered listlessly, "but I don't need help."

"Don't you?" he asked, lighting a cigarette and strolling over to lean against the fireplace. "If I were in your position, I imagine I should be looking for help anywhere I could find it."

"Oh God," she moaned, putting her head in her hands. "I've really mucked up this time. Mother warned me not to get engaged to him. Why on earth couldn't I have listened to her?"

"He wasn't blackmailing you into marriage, then?"

Her head came up, a look of honest puzzlement on her face. "Blackmail?" she asked. "Whatever do you mean?"

"Never mind," said Bethancourt. "If he wasn't, that's one thing in your favor. Where did you meet him, anyway?"

"At a nightclub. The Red Parrot."

Bethancourt raised an eyebrow. "Not the most savory of places," he remarked.

"Oh, it's all right," she said dully. "Not as bad as everyone seems to think."

Bethancourt eyed her carefully. He had the best of reasons for thinking the Red Parrot a den of iniquity; he had been there. However, he supposed it was possible, if one was a little naive and largely unob-

servant, not to notice what was going on in the dark corners of the place. "Do you go there often?" he asked.

She shook her head. "Only the once, actually. Len said he didn't like it." She looked up at him. "If this is your idea of helping me, I can't say I think much of it. You're worse than the police with all these questions."

"It might end up helping, you know," he said persuasively. "You don't really mind, do you?"

His wheedling tone won a small smile from her. "You're a dear, Phillip," she said. "Why couldn't I have picked you to marry?"

"I have no idea," replied Bethancourt. "I seem to have the chief qualification: money."

"That's mean," she said, stung.

For a moment he thought she wouldn't answer. Then she sighed and said, "I suppose it *was* the money. It all seemed so perfect at first. I'd never met anyone quite like Len before. He was terribly romantic and mysterious, and in the beginning we just had such a good time together. He had simply pots of money. And then he was so enthusiastic about Rokeby."

"Really? Did you tell him that you were all broke because of Rokeby?"

"Yes—well, not in so many words. But I explained how we all had to pitch in to keep the old place going, and he seemed to really like the idea of settling in here and doing our bit. It seemed perfect. Only lately . . ." Her voice trailed off.

"He didn't seem so keen?" asked Bethancourt.

"No, no. It wasn't him." She looked down at her hands.

"Perhaps," suggested Bethancourt, "in all this whirlwind of perfection, you hadn't stopped to consider what living with Len would really be like?"

She nodded, still studying her hands. "I was a bloody fool," she said in a low voice. "Mother tried to tell me."

"Oh well," said Bethancourt cheerfully, "that's why we're young, so we can be foolish. Everyone says so. And it doesn't always turn out as badly as this. But I understood from Arnold that the engagement was still on."

"Oh, it was," she agreed. "I was having doubts, but I'd made such a to-do about it I didn't quite see how to break it off."

"Difficult," said Bethancourt. "I can see that. How did Len come by his money, by the way?"

Carrie shrugged. "I never really asked. He was a stockbroker, so I supposed he had inher-

ited a bit and run it up on the exchange."

"His parents were dead, then?"

"Yes, and he hadn't any other relatives, so he was quite ready to adopt us." She sighed gloomily. "If only we'd been ready to adopt him. God, Philip, I still can't believe one of them would kill him. And it's all my fault."

"Nonsense," said Bethancourt briskly. "No matter how objectionable Len was, that's no excuse for murdering the fellow. Carrie, can you think of any reason he would have shown up here unexpectedly?"

"I suppose he must have gotten bored in town and decided to surprise me. He was impulsive like that. I told him on Thursday that you were coming and that I'd be doing Arnold's tours, so I wouldn't have a lot of time. Really, I just didn't want to see him this weekend."

"He might have sensed that," said Bethancourt, "and decided he'd better come along and take you out to a romantic dinner or something. It's what I might do if I thought my girlfriend was going off me."

"Did you and Marla have another row?" asked Arnold from the doorway.

"No, no," said Bethancourt. "Carrie and I were just specu-

lating about why Len would show up so abruptly."

"He must have come up after tea while everyone was out," said Arnold. "We found his bag upstairs in the room he usually had. Anyway, Chief Inspector Kennick is back, and he wants to see you two as soon as he's finished with Uncle James."

"James?" asked Bethancourt, raising an eyebrow.

"Yes, he wouldn't explain what it was about. I was to ask you both not to run off until he was done."

"We will hold ourselves in readiness," said Bethancourt.

Chief Inspector Kennick did not feel that he was having a very successful day. James Prendergast had maintained that both stationmaster and ticket collector were senile, and that he had most certainly gone to London and returned on the trains he had described. This was a blatant lie, but no appeal had shaken him, and it was clearly going to be up to Kennick to discover what James had been doing.

On the brighter side, Bethancourt had identified Joe Crowley with ease and certainty as the young man who had taken the tour of Rokeby House yesterday, but they had got no further with Crowley after that.

He insisted he had left simply because he didn't want to be involved, but Kennick was sure he was lying. Crowley had been scared out of his wits from the moment he saw them, but nothing would shake him from his story: he did not know Leonard Camden. It had been a beautiful day, so he had decided to take a drive to see Rokeby House. He liked looking at historic houses.

"I fancy them myself," Kennick had said pleasantly. "Hampton Court—now, that's a showplace."

Crowley had agreed vaguely that it was.

"I always liked those crystal chandeliers in the front hall," Kennick had gone on. "Very spectacular, I always think."

Crowley had mumbled agreement.

Only there were no crystal chandeliers in the hall at Hampton Court. Crowley had clearly never been there, and Kennick was willing to bet he had never been to a historic house in his life before yesterday.

He had warned Crowley not to absent himself, that they would have further questions, but once again Kennick was clearly going to have to dig up some answers himself before he would have any questions that would open Crowley's mouth.

However, at least Crowley was hiding something. Maybe the Prendergasts were innocent after all.

Kennick and his sergeant had proceeded to Camden's flat in Chelsea where they had spent several hours looking through his things. For all their time, they had turned up only one interesting piece of information: Camden's account at the nearest Barclay's Bank had been opened just over two months ago. Since that time, there had been several deposits—some extremely large—but none of a regular sum consistent with a paycheck.

They had stopped for a late lunch and now were on their way to Camden's previous address in Kensington, which Carrie Prendergast had readily supplied that morning. It was a large, modern block of flats, the type of place where no one knew his neighbor. However, the caretaker, who had the basement flat, proved to be available, if not very happy to have his Sunday dinner interrupted.

"It won't take long," said Kennick apologetically. "We'd just like to ask you one or two questions about an ex-tenant here. Leonard Camden was his name. He lived in flat 2B," he added as the caretaker's face

remained blank, "and he only moved a couple of months ago."

"He wasn't in 2B," said the caretaker firmly. "A man named Crowley's got that flat and has had it for years."

Kennick gaped. "Joe Crowley?" he asked.

"No, not Joe." The caretaker rubbed his chin. "Lee, no, Les. That's it. Les Crowley. I haven't seen him about lately in any case. He keeps himself to himself."

The caretaker had nothing more to say. He did not remember Carrie, and he would not open up the flat unless they had a search warrant. He didn't think Mr. Crowley was a motor mechanic, but he really didn't know anything about him.

"What about the keys, sir?" asked Sergeant Brown eagerly as they made their way back to the car.

"Keys?"

"The ones in Camden's flat. Remember, I said they must be a neighbor's."

"You're right," said Kennick. "They could be the keys to this place. Let's run back and get them."

Bethancourt had spent the drive to London trying to find out why Kennick had wanted to talk to James again, and why he would be interested in Camden's previous address. Ken-

nick, however, refused to say anything beyond commenting, in reference to the second question, that Carrie didn't seem to know much about her fiancé. Which, Bethancourt reflected, was true enough.

He had been hustled away by Sergeant Brown as soon as he had identified Joe Crowley, who, he was gratified to learn, actually was a mechanic. He had been about to return to Norfolk when it occurred to him that he could at least find out if Leonard Camden had a police record. He sought out his friend, Detective Sergeant Jack Gibbons.

Despite its being Sunday, Gibbons was in his office at Scotland Yard. This was because of two unidentified corpses who had been pulled from the Thames early that morning. Gibbons was now involved in the thankless task of looking through the missing persons file in an attempt to find out who they had been. He was in no mood to be bothered by an unrelated murder already in the capable hands of the Norfolk constabulary.

"Maybe one of the tourists did it," he said after Bethancourt had finished describing the crime and its deleterious effect on the Prendergasts.

"It would be nice to think so," said Bethancourt. "I must say that chap Crowley looked awfully guilty when he saw me today. Still," he sighed, "it isn't likely, is it? The Prendergasts already knew Camden and loathed him—it seems a bit of a stretch to go looking for suspects elsewhere."

"Well, you never know," said Gibbons cheerfully, his eyes still glued to his computer screen.

"And I'm worried about Arnold's uncle," continued Bethancourt. "I thought he was safely out of it, being in London all day, but I think Kennick must suspect he met with Camden here, or maybe even returned with him."

"Could be," agreed Gibbons, scrolling down his list.

"What," asked Bethancourt peevishly, "are you looking at? Anybody would think you didn't care about my murder."

"Missing persons. We've got two unidentified bodies in the morgue."

"Two?" asked Bethancourt, his interest piqued. "Did they come together or separately?"

"Together," replied Gibbons. "It's a long story, but basically because of some shenanigans on the river last night, the police sent down divers at dawn this morning. I don't know if they found what they were

looking for, but they did find two bodies neatly weighed down with cinderblocks. One man, one woman, both stark naked and both middle-aged."

"Drowned?" asked Bethancourt, rather horrified.

"No," answered Gibbons, hitting the scroll key again. "They had been quite professionally garrotted. They'd been in the water about a week," he added.

"Oh." Bethancourt considered. "I wonder why they were stripped," he mused.

"Probably because they didn't buy their clothes at Marks and Sparks like everybody else," answered Gibbons. He shot a glance at his friend. "Look at yourself, for instance. If you were murdered, we could probably trace you through your clothes in a few hours. Particularly that shirt."

"What's wrong with it?" asked Bethancourt defensively, looking down at his chest.

"Nothing's *wrong* with it," retorted Gibbons, "but it's custom-made, isn't it?"

"I see your point," admitted Bethancourt. "Well, to get back to my case, what I want to know is whether Leonard Camden had a police record."

"Why didn't you say so in the first place?" asked Gibbons. "There was no need to go on for half an hour if that was all you wanted."

"I don't think finding naked bodies in the Thames agrees with you, Jack," said Bethancourt. "I've never seen you so irritable."

Gibbons did not reply. He had moved to a second computer and was typing rapidly. "There," he said, resuming his seat.

"It only says 'Searching,'" said Bethancourt, bending over to peer at the screen.

"It'll either come up with him in a minute or it won't," said Gibbons, turning back to his own machine. "Keep an eye on it."

Bethancourt waited. In a moment the computer informed him that the subject had not been found.

"Damn," he said, disappointed. "He's not here."

"It only means he's never been caught," said Gibbons kindly. "And if you really think blackmail's his game, well, it's not too likely he'd be in our files."

"I suppose so," said Bethancourt. "Well, I must get back to Norfolk. Thanks, Jack."

Gibbons waved a hand. "Ring me and let me know how it works out," he said.

In the end, Gibbons was destined to find that out for himself.

The keys from the desk in

Leonard Camden's Chelsea flat fit the locks of Les Crowley's flat in Kensington. Jubilant, Kennick and Brown let themselves in and then looked about them in surprise.

The flat had already been searched.

Moreover, from the telltale traces of black fingerprint powder, it was evident who the previous searchers had been.

"Well, sergeant," said Kennick, "we're here—we might as well have a look. But then we'd better run Les Crowley's name through the computer and ring the chief constable."

They found nothing in the flat to connect Les Crowley with Leonard Camden until Kennick discovered a wallet in a dresser drawer. It contained the usual things; all with Crowley's name and the Kensington address, including a driver's license. The picture on it was that of Leonard Camden.

In the morning, the chief constable lost no time in ringing Scotland Yard, who had issued a warrant a week ago for Les Crowley's arrest on charges of cocaine dealing and who had obtained a search warrant for his Kensington flat.

When Detective Superintendent Wallace Carmichael of Scotland Yard was given the case, he took one look at the name of the man who had found

the body and demanded that Jack Gibbons be taken off the river murders and assigned to the Rokeby case.

"Did you know," he thundered when Gibbons appeared, "that your friend Bethancourt is now *finding* bodies?"

"He did mention it, sir," replied Gibbons, who was very tired of missing persons reports and rather relieved to be reassigned.

Carmichael snorted. "Well, you can tell me what he said later—we've got to see Chief Superintendent Hoving now."

"Hoving?" asked Gibbons, falling into step beside his superior. "Isn't he in Narcotics?"

"That's right. They're the ones who searched Crowley's flat."

"Crowley, sir?"

"The dead man, Gibbons," said Carmichael with a withering glance in his sergeant's direction.

Gibbons scratched his head. "I admit I wasn't paying a lot of attention to Bethancourt," he said, "but I'm quite sure the body he found was named Leonard Camden."

"So it was," agreed Carmichael without breaking stride. "That was the alias Crowley was using. Hurry up, lad. We can't keep Hoving waiting."

Gibbons followed, a little bewildered, wondering how a

drug dealer with a double identity had ended up murdered in one of England's historic houses. At least, he thought, things were looking up for the Prendergast family.

The Prendergasts would have been relieved to hear it. Upon returning to Rokeby on Sunday afternoon, Bethancourt found Carrie and Eric having a tremendous row in the garden in which accusations and insults were flung heatedly, as if they were stones. It was the more absurd since most of the faults mentioned seemed to stem from childhood injustices. The arrival of Bethancourt, an outsider, put an abrupt end to the argument, but they were still smoldering as they parted and there was no denying that some unfortunate things had been said that were bound to come home to roost later.

After dinner that evening, James, fortified by one too many brandies, attempted to explain to his sister-in-law where she had gone wrong in rearing her children, implying that the said child-rearing methods had clearly molded her offspring into reckless adults who unerringly chose potential murder victims as spouses. Anyone else would have laughed off the extreme

absurdity of these charges, but Emily, known for her intuition rather than her logic, saw nothing but the antagonism behind them and replied in kind. The argument became more heated, with James's accusations growing increasingly wilder while Emily's grew more pointed. Arnold and Tom, who had heard raised voices and were coming in to play peacemakers, unfortunately arrived just as Emily dredged up an ancient indiscretion of James's, long ago forgiven and forgotten, which the younger members of the family knew nothing about. Arnold and Tom were horrified; James, embarrassed by their presence, was reduced to roaring like a lion, while Emily turned to her son and demanded that he eject James from the house. It was with some difficulty that the combatants were separated, and it took the rest of the night to calm them down to the point where apologies were offered.

This incident sent Carrie into a black depression, and she spent an hour sobbing on Bethancourt's shoulder while he attempted to alleviate her guilt. He partly succeeded and was rewarded later that night by the appearance of Carrie in his bedroom. Whether this was meant as some bizarre gesture of thanks or whether she was simply searching for further

distraction, Bethancourt had no idea, but whatever her motives, he wanted no part of it. He had to say so rather firmly, especially since her idea of seduction appeared to rely on the pouncing method, leaving very little room for conversation. He was afraid he had offended her, but even if only her pride had been hurt, he knew the morning was sure to be awkward.

He was quite right. Carrie refused to so much as glance in his direction at breakfast, a meal which the entire family gulped down in record time, deserting the dining room as quickly as possible. Carrie was one of the first to flee. Bethancourt swallowed some coffee and went in pursuit of her.

He found her giving the dogs their morning run, and he and Cerberus joined her, although she clearly did not want his company.

"I can take him along with the others," she said, still not meeting his eyes. "You don't have to stick around."

"I want to," he said. "It's a lovely morning for a walk."

"Henry!" she called out sharply. "Leave it!"

"Besides," he continued, "I think we ought to talk."

"Really, I don't want to," she said coolly. "Henry, I said leave it!"

Clearly, he had offended her more than he thought. Taking a deep breath, he launched into a lengthy and tedious speech about how his moral code wouldn't let him take advantage of a lady in a distressed frame of mind, not to mention his desire to remain faithful to his current girlfriend. By the end of it, she had broken down enough to vent her own feelings and was viewing him in a somewhat friendlier light. It took another hour of conversation to convince her that she hadn't really wanted him at all and that he had merely anticipated her true desires and therefore spared her the awkwardness of an involvement she would have regretted. Bethancourt was quite proud of this effort and was only sorry he couldn't share it with anyone.

Having settled Carrie, he turned to the gardens in search of Alcock, who had been the only person in a position to witness Camden's arrival at the house. Luckily the old gardener had put his teeth in that morning, and he also remembered Bethancourt as a boy. As a longtime friend of the family, Bethancourt could be trusted, and Alcock seemed almost eager to answer his questions. Unfortunately, he had noticed nothing.

"I was watching them tourists," he said. "You have to watch 'em every minute, you know. If I didn't, there wouldn't be a bud nor a flower left. You turn your back for a second, and they've got half the garden in bouquets. I keep telling Mr. Arnold I could use some help, but all he did was post those signs." Alcock snorted, showing his opinion of signs. "That don't do any good—it only puts ideas in their heads. And if they're not picking the flowers, they're wandering off the paths, trampling over things, or getting into the kitchen garden. I don't let 'em in there, and don't you think it."

Bethancourt assured him that such a thought had never entered his head and had he happened to see Miss Carrie's fiancé arriving?

"No, but I thought I'd lost one of them punters," answered Alcock. "I heard a noise, see, and I thought, God Almighty, one of them's in the kitchen garden, eating the early strawberries. Gave me quite a scare. So I nipped in to roust them out, but it was only Mr. Tom having a bit of a walk. So I got back, quick as I could, to the others, but they didn't seem to have done any harm." He looked around the garden suspiciously, as if he were still expecting to discover some catas-

trophe engineered by the tourists in his absence. "That's what I mean about needing help," he added. "If somebody was watching with me, they could have kept an eye out while I was in the kitchen garden, you see."

Bethancourt was not at all heartened to find that Tom Prendergast had left the office and been seen so near the house. He agreed that Alcock could certainly use some help in policing the gardens and asked at what time he had seen Tom.

Alcock wasn't sure, but after detailing the arrival of each of the tourists, and the clever way in which he had peeked through the hedges to keep track of those in the rose garden, the most likely time seemed to be about four thirty.

Bethancourt thanked the old man and turned back to the house. Four thirty did not make him happy. In all likelihood Camden had arrived sometime after four, found the house empty, and gone down to the billiard room where he had been murdered. If Tom had continued through the kitchen garden at four thirty, he might well have encountered Camden in the house, or even seen him through the billiard room window.

Lunch was a casual affair. Bethancourt, learning that Tom had taken his sandwiches to the estate office, made a pretense of eating and then went in search of him.

Tom Prendergast was a quiet, self-contained young man. He seemed surprised to see Bethancourt but offered him a seat and continued eating his sandwich.

"I was just wondering," Bethancourt began, "whether you had happened to notice Camden arriving. He left his car in the tourist car park, you know, and the kitchen garden's not far from there."

Tom looked faintly puzzled. "But I was here," he said.

"Well, yes, of course," said Bethancourt a little uncomfortably. "I meant later, when you went out."

"But I didn't go out."

Bethancourt affected great surprise. "I'm terribly sorry," he said. "I was talking to Alcock, and he told me that he had seen you in the kitchen garden at about four thirty. I must have misunderstood." He rose. "I'll just go down and find him again and straighten it out."

"Wait a moment," said Tom, still quite calmly. "I suppose it was me that he saw. Not," he added, "that it's any business of yours."

"No," agreed Bethancourt. "Only I've been trying to work out alibis for everyone, and it would help enormously if I knew just when Camden had arrived. So did you see him?"

"No," answered Tom flatly. "I didn't go into the car park."

"Where did you go, then?"

Understandably, Tom seemed to resent Bethancourt's questions. He hesitated and then said, "I went out for a breath of air, and then I thought I'd wolf down a couple of surreptitious strawberries while Alcock was busy looking after the tourists. After that, I came back here. And I must say, Phillip, that it's in very bad taste for you to go round playing detective."

Bethancourt sighed. Having one's friends as suspects was proving to be a great handicap. With any other witness, he would have said something polite and left, but now he would have to spend a lot of time appeasing Tom's rather understandable ire, just as he had spent half the morning talking Carrie round. He lit a cigarette and plunged into a conciliatory speech.

By the time he left the estate office, he was feeling rather emotionally exhausted by the Prendergasts. On the way back to the house, he encountered Arnold coming in search of

him. Arnold was downcast over a spat between Beryl and Alice, normally the best of friends. It had not amounted to much but went to prove that everyone's nerves were on edge.

"And it's only been two days," said Arnold gloomily.

Bethancourt privately agreed that the Prendergasts were not holding up well under the strain, but he tried to take the optimistic view that the police would soon have the matter cleared up. He decided that what Arnold most needed was a sounding post, so he encouraged him to talk while they sat on the terrace in the early spring sunshine. Bethancourt, listening with half an ear to his friend, was so tired that he had to stifle a yawn. Moreover, he was hungry, not having eaten much lunch. He wondered if Beryl and Alice had patched up their differences enough to make tea.

"I wonder who that is," said Arnold as the sound of a car in the drive reached them.

They rose and wandered round the side of the house to be greeted by the sight of the police emerging from their car.

"Good Lord," said Bethancourt, considerably surprised. "It's Jack and the superintendent."

"Who?" asked Arnold.

Bethancourt was spared from replying by Kennick, who had accompanied the Scotland Yard detectives and who now introduced them to Arnold.

"Chief Inspector Kennick and I would like to speak to your uncle first," said Carmichael. "Sergeant, you will talk to Mr. Bethancourt."

"Yes, sir," murmured Gibbons, smiling a little at his friend's surprise. He drew him to one side and asked, "Is there somewhere we can talk in private?"

"Certainly."

Bethancourt took him up to his bedroom and shut the heavy door firmly behind them.

"What," he demanded, "is going on?"

"Quite a place, this," said Gibbons, sinking into the armchair and surveying the room appreciatively.

"Jack!"

"Yes, all right. Carmichael and I are here because Len Camden was really a drug dealer named Lester Crowley."

"Great heavens," said Bethancourt, dropping heavily into the desk chair. Gibbons grinned openly at his astonishment. "Wait a minute," Bethancourt added when his wits returned to him, "wasn't that motor mechanic's name Crowley?"

"That's right," said Gibbons. "Joe is Lester's younger brother. We caught him this morning at his mother's place."

"Mother?" asked Bethancourt wildly. "But Carrie said Len's parents were dead."

"His father is," said Gibbons. "Tell me, Phillip, do you think she knew?"

"No," said Bethancourt after a moment's reflection. "No, Carrie's very young and a bit rebellious, but she would never have considered marrying a man whose income depended on the uncertainty of the drug trade. Dammit, Jack, she was looking for financial security."

Gibbons nodded. "Well, you can see how this changes things," he said. "It's still perfectly possible, of course, that one of the family killed him. On the other hand, his business partners may have followed him up here. You see, Narcotics Division got a warrant for his arrest a week ago, based on information from some dealers they had busted. Camden was their supplier, and it's quite possible he could have identified the higher-ups. That would give them a good motive for getting him out of the way. Unfortunately, Narcotics knew nothing about the Chelsea flat and had only staked out the Kensington address. They searched it when he didn't turn

up but found nothing. We've had better luck now in Chelsea."

"So you think he was using Rokeby as a hideout?" asked Bethancourt.

"It looks like it," answered Gibbons. "This is what I think happened: Crowley was a bright lad by all accounts. He knew he couldn't get away with cocaine dealing forever, and he was probably looking for a way out when he met your friend's sister."

"It must have seemed perfect," said Bethancourt. "No one would ever dream of looking for him at Rokeby, and I don't think he realized the Prendergasts have no money. He would have seen this place, and all the stuff in the public rooms, and thought he was marrying a gold mine."

"Probably," agreed Gibbons. "Anyway, he started setting up this new identity for himself. He kept very quiet about it; his brother knew nothing about the Chelsea flat or about Rokeby, although he did know about the cocaine dealing."

Bethancourt raised a skeptical eyebrow. "If he didn't know about Rokeby, how did he end up here?" he asked.

Gibbons waved a hand. "I meant Camden didn't tell him about it. Joe was getting worried about his brother, at least

according to him. Les had never been a devoted family man, but he kept in touch and a telephone call usually brought a fairly prompt response from him. But in the last few months, Les had become increasingly distant and increasingly hard to get hold of. Personally, I think he never meant to see his family again after he got married and was trying to ease into it by degrees."

"Not very nice," said Bethancourt. "But it doesn't explain how Joe decided to take a tour of Rokeby last Saturday."

"I'm getting to it," said Gibbons. "Basically, Joe got worried enough a few weeks ago to try following his brother. Not much came of it until the weekend before last when Camden was indiscreet enough to drive straight from the Kensington flat to Rokeby. Joe followed him without any trouble. When Camden turned into the gates here and didn't come out, Joe hied himself off to the village pub and heard all about the Prendergasts and even about Carrie's fiancé. He also found out that Rokeby was open for tours, although he didn't dare take one for fear of running into Les. He was pretty puzzled by the whole setup, but since Les seemed to be all right, he didn't say anything. Then, a

week ago, Les didn't show up for a lunch date. Joe left messages but never heard from him, so he finally decided to come up here and see if this was where Les was hiding out. He took the tour instead of knocking at the front door because he didn't want to queer whatever deal Les had going here. When he saw his brother's body, he ran off, absolutely terrified that he'd invaded a drug lord's sanctuary and that he'd be next."

"It's a good story," said Bethancourt. "Do you think it's true?"

"I think parts of it are," replied Gibbons. "I think Joe truly didn't know about Rokeby and that he found out the way he says he did. What's missing, I believe, is that Joe was dealing himself in a small way and that, for some reason, Camden didn't give him his supply. I think that's why Joe was so worried about his brother and why he had the nerve to follow him up here."

"But you don't think he killed him?"

"He could have," said Gibbons cheerfully. "But so far there's no motive for it—it would be tantamount to killing the goose that laid the golden egg for Joe. And I must say that bit about running off because he thought the Prendergasts

were master criminals sounded genuine."

"I really don't think they are, Jack," said Bethancourt, alarmed.

"Oh, neither do I," agreed Gibbons. "Camden was dealing long before he ever knew the Prendergasts existed. Anyway, with this new spanner thrown into the works, what I'm supposed to get from you is every last detail you can remember about those tourists. If Camden was killed by his bosses, the murderer might well have been among them."

"But how would they have known about Rokeby?" objected Bethancourt.

"They could have followed him the same way Joe did, or they could have gotten it from Joe himself. He swears, of course, that he never told a soul, but I doubt that's true. So if you would kindly describe your tour group . . ."

"I'll try," said Bethancourt doubtfully, "but I really don't think I can add anything to what I said before."

"Begin at the beginning," suggested Gibbons helpfully. "There you are, about to give your first historic house tour—"

"Wait a minute," interrupted Bethancourt. "What about Uncle James? Why all the interest in him?"

"Because he never went to London," answered Gibbons. "He was looking like suspect number one, but now we're not so sure. Kennick found a witness who saw him at the station Saturday morning after Tom dropped him off. He was getting into a red MG driven by a woman. The witness only saw the back of the woman's head, and assumed it was Lady Beryl picking him up. But none of the Prendergasts owns an MG."

"Sounds like a spot of infidelity."

"It probably is," said Gibbons. "Still, he might have been using the lady as an alibi. Anyway, we've got to find out who she is, and it would be a lot easier if he would simply tell us. Now, let's get back to the tourists."

"All right," said Bethancourt, without enthusiasm.

James, given a choice between telling all or having the police ask his daughter-in-law if she had borrowed a red MG and met him at the station on Saturday, decided to tell all. In a few minutes, he had given them the lady's name, address, and telephone number, and completely accounted for his time. He was dismissed, still pleading for discretion, which the detectives had already promised. Kennick departed to

check on this statement, while Carmichael settled down with Carrie Prendergast. He broke the news of her fiancé's duplicity as gently as he could, and then, for the next two and a half hours, proceeded to elicit every detail she could remember about anyone she had ever met with Camden or that he had even mentioned. The superintendent was relentless and only let her go when it became clear that she was exhausted and becoming faintly hysterical. He and Gibbons then broke for supper but returned after an hour to interview Tom Prendergast about his walk in the kitchen garden.

The tension that had presided over the Rokeby meals for the last two days was somewhat alleviated at dinner that night, replaced by shock at the revelation of Len Camden's true identity. Since Carrie was having a tray in her room, everyone felt free to discuss the subject. They all reiterated how they had never liked him, Emily in particular priding herself on the intuition that had led her to forbid her daughter's marrying him. Everyone considerably refrained from pointing out just how much effect this edict had had. Eric shook his head over Carrie's gullibility and was becoming rather

unbearable on the subject until Arnold pointed out that they had all spent a good bit of time with Len without ever suspecting there was anything seriously wrong with him. All in all, Bethancourt thought, they seemed relieved; they appeared to have little doubt that drugs led to murder and that therefore they were all in the clear.

“**D**amn!” said Bethancourt, hearing Gibbons' voice on his answering machine. Feeling there was little more he could do at Rokeby and that he had probably outstayed his welcome in any case, he had returned to town the next morning, just missing Gibbons at Scotland Yard. He had debated with himself but had finally decided to keep a lunch date rather than just sit around the flat waiting for Gibbons' call. And, of course, it was during lunch that Gibbons had looked for him.

“I've got a bit of a lead,” Gibbons' voice was saying cautiously on the machine. “It seems the Morrisises—those honeymooners on the tour—aren't married at all. I thought you might like to check it out with me. I'll ring you later to let you know how it comes out.”

Bethancourt cursed again and flicked the machine off. As if in answer, the phone rang and Bethancourt snatched it up, but it was only Arnold Prendergast.

"Just calling to see if there's any news your end," he said in a thoroughly depressed tone of voice.

"Nothing solid yet," answered Bethancourt. "What's happening at Rokeby?"

"Tom's had a horrible row with his father," said Arnold. "Of course we'd all like to know why the police seem so interested in Uncle James, but I'm afraid Tom went a bit too far. On the other hand, you can't help but feel there's something suspicious in the way Uncle James refuses to say anything."

"Oh," said Bethancourt, feeling this placed him in a moral dilemma. "Actually," he said, "the police are satisfied with James's explanation now. He has an alibi."

"I see," said Arnold. He paused for a moment. "And the fact that you haven't told me what it is means there's a woman involved."

"Oh, hell," said Bethancourt.

"I thought it must be that, if it wasn't anything to do with the murder. Are the police quite sure?"

"Quite," said Bethancourt. "Look here, you might as well have the whole story, since you've figured out the worst part of it. James never went to London at all. His lady friend picked him up at the station after Tom dropped him off, and they spent the day together. Not only has she confirmed that, but they stopped at a pub before she took him back to the station to meet you. The people at the pub remember them, and that covered most of the relevant time."

"Well, that's good at least," said Arnold. "I don't think I'd better tell the others all that, but I'll manage somehow to vouch for Uncle James's innocence."

"Your mother's clear, too," added Bethancourt for good measure, although no one had ever really suspected her. "Kennick found that cafe she stopped at. They remembered her quite well."

There was a smile in Arnold's voice. "People always do remember Mother," he said. "Well, at least that's two of us off the hook. I don't suppose the police are making any headway with people outside the family?"

"Jack says he's got a lead," answered Bethancourt, "but I don't know much about it yet. Just that those newlyweds on

the tour I gave aren't married at all. It's rather encouraging that they lied about their reason for being at Rokeby, but that doesn't get us very far."

Arnold was immeasurably cheered by this piece of news, however. "Superintendent Carmichael spent all morning with Carrie," he confided. "The poor girl's exhausted and, well, I was rather afraid that he'd found out she'd done it after all."

"Not yet," replied Bethancourt. "Try to hold on, Arnold. I'm sure the police will have it all cleared up shortly. Jack is going to ring me later about the Morrisises, and I'll pass it on to you."

"Thanks, Phillip," said Arnold gratefully. "I can't tell you what a help you've been. I don't know how we'd have got through without you."

"I've done hardly anything," said Bethancourt. "Save your thanks. I'll ring you later."

He put down the receiver, wishing more than ever that he had skipped lunch and waited for Gibbons.

Gibbons did not appear until after seven that evening. He looked pale and tired as he dropped into one of Bethancourt's armchairs and shook his head at his friend's questions.

"It was no good," he said.

"Oh dear," said Bethancourt, handing him a drink. "It sounded so hopeful. What happened?"

Gibbons took a long drink from his glass. "Rick Morris is in the throes of a very nasty divorce case. Barbara Morris, who is really still Miss Banks, comes from a very staunch Roman Catholic family. They would not, it seems, look favorably on her living in sin with Morris, nor, for that matter, do they approve of divorce. So Barbara and Rick pretended to elope. To lend verisimilitude to an otherwise unconvincing story, they got dressed up and took snapshots of themselves down at the registrar's office, and then they took their vacations together so they could take pictures of their supposed honeymoon. They haven't much money, so a trip to Norfolk was the best they could do."

"It doesn't sound very likely," said Bethancourt.

"It's unlikely enough to be true," responded Gibbons. "I've spent the day looking into it. The Bankses are indeed Roman Catholics. Both Barbara and Rick have held their present jobs for years, and neither their bank accounts nor their lifestyle shows them to have any money in excess of their salaries. I've checked with their

friends, who all tell the same story. I've checked with their neighbors at their old addresses, who never noticed anything untoward in their habits. If they had ever met Len Camden, I can find no trace of it."

Bethancourt sighed. "It does sound like a washout," he admitted.

"I'm sorry, Phillip," said Gibbons, "but I'm not certain this case will ever be solved."

"Oh God, don't say that," begged Bethancourt. "I've been cheering Arnold up by assuring him you'll have it solved at any minute."

"Then you've been lying," said Gibbons flatly. "Look here, Phillip, there's no evidence. Forensics didn't pick up an atom of anything that didn't belong in that billiard room, not fibers, not fingerprints. That's been a problem all along, but if we could show motive and opportunity, we might have tied it together. Unfortunately, no one seems to have more of a motive than anyone else, and everybody had the opportunity."

"Details, details." Bethancourt waved a hand. "You're just feeling discouraged because you've had a long day. Have some more whisky."

"Cheers," said Gibbons, who always appreciated Bethancourt's stock of single malt scotch. "Don't misunderstand

me," he went on. "We're still working on it, and we may yet turn something up. But at the moment, if I had to guess, I would say one of the Prendergasts did it on the spur of the moment. Carmichael's been talking to Tom for most of the afternoon and thinks he could be hiding something. Tom doesn't usually work in the estate office on Saturdays, you know, and for all we know he may only have decided to go there after he ran into Crowley and killed him."

"What does Tom say?"

"That he was working Saturday because he left the office early on Friday to go out with some friends, and that he went into the kitchen garden when he realized Alcock was otherwise occupied and he, Tom, could therefore steal some strawberries. It may be true. Or he may have been quietly killing Crowley. And if that's the truth, I don't see how we can ever prove it."

"Don't be so pessimistic," retorted Bethancourt, in whom Gibbons' attitude was provoking uneasiness nevertheless. "And I don't particularly care if you can prove it in court, so long as I can tell Arnold who did it. It's awful to think one of your nearest and dearest has committed murder and not

know which of them it is. No family could stand the strain."

"I know," said Gibbons, sighing. "But they may have to."

Bethancourt eyed his friend. "You've been overworking," he said. "What you need to put you back in spirits is a nice rave-up."

"No, I don't," said Gibbons hastily, alarmed by the determined glint in Bethancourt's hazel eyes. The glint nearly always meant he would soon be persuaded into doing whatever Bethancourt had in mind, whether he wanted to or not. He had no desire and was really too tired to go running off on a tour of West End nightclubs, which was Bethancourt's usual diversion. "What I need is sleep."

"Nothing too energetic," mused Bethancourt, ignoring him. "I've got it—there's a very funny film playing not far from here. It's not too long, and I'll take you for dinner afterwards."

"I really don't thin—"

"Indian food at that restaurant round the corner. You like Indian food."

"So does everybody," grumbled Gibbons ungratefully, although secretly he was relieved that nightclubs had not been mentioned. "And I'll probably fall asleep in the film."

"Nonsense. It's far too funny to sleep through. Drink up—it starts in twenty minutes."

Gibbons drank up.

The next afternoon, as Bethancourt turned in to Fortnum and Mason's, he encountered the American wife, Mrs. MacDonald, coming out. For an instant he could not place her, but then it came back to him and he hailed her pleasantly. She smiled, but her look was blank, so he reintroduced himself.

"Oh yes, of course!" she exclaimed. "Mr. Bethancourt. I hadn't really forgotten you, you know," she confided. "Or that dreadful day." She sighed.

"I hope the rest of your vacation has been pleasanter," he said politely.

"Oh yes," she said. "We've been to Canterbury and Winchester and Bath. And lots of other historic houses. But do you know—and I really mean this—none of the tours has been as much fun as the one you gave. Either the other tour guides don't know as much or else they don't tell everything. I'm going to recommend Rokeby House to everyone back home."

"Er, thank you," said Bethancourt guiltily, remembering the stupendous lies of which his

tour had consisted. "Very kind of you."

He offered her tea, motioning to one of Fortnum and Mason's famous tea shops, but she declined, saying her husband was waiting. They bade each other goodbye, and Bethancourt watched her leave, vaguely uneasy for no reason he could name.

It was not until they were weighing out his order of pâté that he remembered Gibbons had told him the MacDonalds had returned to America on Monday.

"Nonsense," said Gibbons when Bethancourt finally tracked him down at the Yard. "Kennick talked to them less than an hour before they left for the airport. You must have been mistaken, Phillip."

"Jack," said Bethancourt, pushing his glasses back up on the bridge of his nose, "I *spoke* to her. She recognized me. She told me how much she liked the tour of Rokeby."

Gibbons was startled. "It doesn't seem possible," he protested, but he was flipping through the case file as he spoke. "I'll ring their hotel."

The desk clerk remembered the MacDonalds very well, but he regretted that they had checked out on Monday. No, he did not think they were still in

England; he understood they were returning to America.

"Well, they didn't," said Bethancourt flatly after Gibbons had rung off.

"All right, all right," said Gibbons, turning back to the file. "Don't get your knickers in a twist. What time is it in America?"

"What part of America?" demanded Bethancourt. "Be a bit more specific, can't you?"

"New York," answered Gibbons, who was already dialing. "The state, not the city."

"Ten—no, eleven in the morning," said Bethancourt, but Gibbons was no longer listening. His attention was now on the phone, but in a moment he made a face.

"Answering machine," he said. "Well, nothing ventured . . ."

He broke off to leave a message asking the MacDonalds to contact Scotland Yard.

"Let's try the relatives," he said.

"Relatives?" asked Bethancourt.

"Yes, there's a married daughter. Kennick checked with her to make certain her parents really were in England and not sitting at home having had their passports stolen. Here's the number."

This time he got an answer. When he identified himself,

Jeanine Reid gasped. "Have you found them?" she demanded.

Gibbons was taken aback. "I'm trying to get in touch with your parents, Mrs. Reid," he said. "Are they missing?"

"Of course they are!" she said, hysteria edging her voice. "Oh God, you didn't even know, did you?"

"We thought something must be wrong," answered Gibbons, motioning Bethancourt to move to a nearby desk and pick up the receiver.

Mrs. Reid was only too willing to repeat her story. She and her husband had driven to the airport on Monday to pick up her parents. The Reids had arrived early and had gotten a good place at the barrier, with a clear view of the doors through which international passengers would emerge from Customs. Eventually, they had noticed some people whose luggage bore her parents' flight number coming through, and they had scanned the travelers eagerly, thinking it could not be long now. But the MacDonalds had never appeared. The Reids had waited a long while until at last Mr. Reid had gone off to see what he could find out, leaving his wife still waiting. The airline had confirmed that the MacDonalds had been on the flight, and a little further

investigation by an airport official determined that all the luggage from that flight had been claimed. Further, no one from the flight had been stopped at Customs, nor had anyone collapsed with a medical emergency between airplane and baggage claim.

The Reids had been at a loss. They had returned home, hoping for a message, but there had been none. They had rung the MacDonalds' hotel in London, only to be told that the MacDonalds had left for America. They had contacted the police, who, in the next day or two, confirmed what the Reids had already discovered at the airport. They postulated that the Reids had missed seeing the MacDonalds and that someone, probably posing as a taxi driver, had spirited them away.

Mrs. Reid was absolutely certain this was not what had occurred. It had not been a particularly crowded time at the airport, and people had been coming out of Customs in dribs and drabs. It was simply not possible that both she and her husband had failed to see her parents coming out of doors in full view not twenty feet away. Mrs. Reid was convinced that something had prevented her parents from boarding the flight after they had checked

in. The airlines maintained that this was impossible—the MacDonalds' boarding passes had been handed in, and the police were taking their word for it. So yesterday the Reids had employed a private investigator in London. They had faxed him photographs of the MacDonalds, a copy of their itinerary, and the numbers of their credit cards.

Gibbons took down the investigator's name and address and then brought the conversation to a close, assuring Mrs. Reid he would do everything he could to clear the matter up.

But from the moment he had heard that the MacDonalds were missing, he had a sinking feeling that he knew what had happened to them.

He and Bethancourt looked silently at each other for a moment after they had rung off. Then Gibbons stirred.

"I've heard of this detective, David Martindale," he said. "He has a good reputation."

"We'd better try to get hold of him and have a look at those photographs," answered Bethancourt. "That is, if you're thinking what I am."

"Yes," sighed Gibbons, reaching once again for the phone. "I'm afraid I am."

David Martindale was not at his office, but his secretary said she would beep him. In ten

minutes or so he rang back and agreed to come round to the Yard with the photographs.

"I hope you know what's become of the MacDonalds, sergeant," he said, "because I don't. I didn't get anything at all at the airport, or from their credit cards, and all I can tell you is that they didn't keep to their itinerary."

"We'll see," said Gibbons without much enthusiasm. "The photographs should show us, one way or the other." He hung up the phone and rose. "I should see if Carmichael's back yet," he told Bethancourt. "You had better come, too. If he's there, we'll no doubt see Martindale in his office."

"Very well," said Bethancourt, stubbing out a cigarette and rising. "God, I hope we're wrong, Jack."

"Maybe we are," replied Gibbons, but Bethancourt shook his head and the look in Gibbons' eyes showed that he thought the hope vain as well.

David Martindale was a tall, thin man in his forties, neatly dressed in a sports jacket and khakis. He must have been surprised and curious to be introduced to Detective Superintendent Carmichael rather than just Sergeant Gibbons, but he hid it well. He shook hands politely and then said, "I have the

photographs and all the other information right here. I hope it matches up with whatever you're working on."

He produced several folded sheets of paper from his breast pocket and handed them to Carmichael, who thanked him and immediately passed them to Bethancourt. He smoothed out the pictures on the edge of the desk and leaned over them while the others watched him.

"No," he said, after only a moment's study. "These are not the people on the tour at Rokeby."

Martindale shifted in his chair, betraying his curiosity, but he said nothing while Carmichael took the photos back and compared them to others laid out on his desk. Gibbons peered over Carmichael's shoulder, but Bethancourt wandered away to the window and lit a cigarette.

"It's hard to tell, of course," said Carmichael. "But I think they match." Gibbons grunted an affirmative, and Carmichael looked up, beckoning to Martindale to join them. "These," he explained, "are the pictures we took of two murder victims we pulled out of the Thames on Sunday."

Martindale frowned, peering intently from one set of pictures to the other. "I can't be sure," he said at last. "The

faces are too bloated, but it looks very much like it."

"Dental records will give us proof," said Carmichael.

Martindale sighed and straightened. "So they're dead. I feel sorry for Mrs. Reid," he said. Then his expression changed. "Wait a minute," he said. "You said you found them on Sunday?"

"That's right," said Carmichael evenly. "They'd been dead for some time. In fact, if they are the MacDonalds, I think they were murdered very shortly after they arrived here."

Bethancourt was allowed to go home to feed and collect his dog. On his return, a police artist awaited him, and over the next two hours they produced fairly good representations of the couple who had impersonated the MacDonalds at Rokeby. Afterwards, he was settled at a desk with endless books of mug shots to look through. He was not by nature a patient person, and thus far in the pursuit of his detective hobby, he had always been able to leave the plodding, routine work to Gibbons. But his friend could be of no help in this instance; only Bethancourt and Chief Inspector Kennick had ever seen the bogus MacDonalds. Sighing mightily, and

growing increasingly fractious, he sat chained to his duty, turning over page after page of police photographs as the night wore on. He was resolved that, if he had to do it, he would get it over with quickly, that night, and not have to wake up in the morning with the prospect of coming back to the job. It was nearly two in the morning before he found one of the pictures he had been searching for.

It was another perfect spring day. Bethancourt and Arnold paced slowly through the Rokeby park along a path dappled green and gold with sunshine. Cerberus and Henry, Arnold's favorite dog, gamboled around them, inspecting the bases of trees and chasing squirrels. Bethancourt paused to light a cigarette, and Arnold stood beside him, watching the dogs as they circled back toward their owners.

"When did they find them?" asked Arnold.

"Yesterday," answered Bethancourt. "And Kennick and I picked them out of a lineup without any trouble," he added, rather boastfully. "In any case, they were foolish enough to keep some of the MacDonalds' things, including the passports. The police think they have a pretty good case." He hesitated. "But I don't know if they'll be

prosecuted for Camden's murder."

"What?" Arthur turned to him, startled.

"There's no real evidence," explained Bethancourt. "We know they killed him because there's no other reason for them to have been here or to have killed the MacDonalds in the first place, but that's circumstantial. Anyway, it hasn't been decided yet."

Arnold sighed. "I suppose it doesn't really matter," he said. "So long as we know who it was. Were they Camden's bosses in the cocaine business, by the way?"

"Lord no," answered Bethancourt. "They were just hired thugs, and I gather it's driving the police crazy that they won't identify their employers. They apparently have no doubt that their own lives would be brief if they spoke."

"But if execution is the regular punishment for naming names, why would these bosses think that Len would betray them? He wasn't a stupid man."

"Because they had found out he had a secret identity," replied Bethancourt. "And to them that signaled a betrayal. The police think his bosses probably first became aware that Crowley was up to something soon after he rented the

Chelsea flat. Suddenly he wasn't to be found a lot of the time, and he'd abandoned all his favorite haunts. So before they had him killed as an example, they put a watch on him to find out how much he might already have revealed—it would never occur to them that he was just trying to retire."

"I suppose not," agreed Arnold. "I don't expect many people try to retire from that crowd."

"We don't know how they found out about Rokeby," continued Bethancourt. "Either someone saw Crowley with Carrie and traced her here, or else his brother Joe was persuaded to talk. In any case, they never found the Chelsea flat and they couldn't have found out about Rokeby much before the crisis."

"What crisis?" asked Arnold.

"Narcotics Division arrested one of the dealers Crowley was supplying," answered Bethancourt, "and he talked. When the head of the drug operation heard about that, he realized that whatever game Crowley had been playing it hadn't been with the police. If it had been, they would hardly have shown their hand by arresting a relative small-fry. It then became crucial to get rid of Crowley before the police found him.

"I don't think Crowley ever realized his bosses were suspicious of him, but he knew the dealer would give his name to the police and that therefore the time had come to quit. He immediately decamped to the Chelsea flat, taking the rest of the last cocaine shipment with him. We may never know why he decided to come to Rokeby, but I think in their last phone conversation Carrie communicated more of her change of heart to him than she meant to. Since from his point of view it was now vital that she go through with their plans, he came down to inject a little romance into the situation."

"Probably," said Arnold. "Carrie's not very good at hiding her feelings. I take it the drug lords had already sent this chap Weldon and his girlfriend up here to kill him?"

"That's right. But really, Arnold, this place isn't very easy to get into."

"Nonsense," scoffed Arnold. "There are a dozen places one can get over the wall, and we leave the gates open half the time anyway."

"Yes," said Bethancourt, "but what then? You've got half a dozen dogs roaming the place, Alcock in the garden, and family members bouncing all over. Except on the days you're open to the public, an intruder

doesn't have a chance. At least that's how Weldon saw it, and I think he was right. He heard about the tours and decided to pose as a tourist as the easiest way of getting into the place. He also realized that if he could pass himself off as someone else, the police might never suspect him. He sent his girlfriend to keep a lookout for Camden up here while he haunted Heathrow. We're not sure how he picked the MacDonalds up—probably by offering them a ride—but they were perfect for his purposes. They knew no one in England, had never been here before, and were about Weldon's age. With his criminal connections, it was easy to get the passport pictures altered, and then he joined his girlfriend up here to await Camden's arrival—they must have had a fit when he took a week to show up. They were probably watching the entrance to Rokeby and followed him in, hoping to catch him in the car park. But they missed him there, so they wandered into the gardens with the rest of the tourists and from there to the back of the house. They probably looked in the windows, saw Camden in the billiard room, and crept in by that back door."

"I'm surprised Alcock didn't notice they'd disappeared," said

Arnold. "He keeps a fierce eye on people in the gardens."

"Yes, but he can't be everywhere at once," answered Bethancourt. "He said when he heard Tom in the kitchen garden he thought it might be some of the tourists, so clearly he knew he didn't have them all under his eye. He just made sure the absent ones weren't in fact still in the gardens, digging up the plants, and left it at that. And Weldon was clever. He knew it might look odd—if any of the other tourists had noticed that he and his girlfriend were gone—for them to reappear in the gardens, so they came back through the car park and were waiting on the terrace for the house tour when the others came up, just a couple not very interested in flowers. Then all they had to do was sit back and pretend they were the MacDonalds. As hapless American tourists who had only been in the country a week, Kennick never suspected them. It would have worked beautifully if I hadn't chanced to run into 'Mrs. MacDonald' after they had supposedly left England."

"Yes," said Arnold, "I didn't understand that bit. I thought you said earlier that they *did* leave. So how did they end up back in London?"

"Oh, that part of the plan was very clever," said Bethancourt almost enthusiastically. "In order to assure that no one would look for the MacDonalds over here, Weldon and his girlfriend actually flew to the States with the MacDonalds' passports and on their flight. Then they turned around and flew to Paris on a different airline, still using the MacDonalds' passports. Once they were in France, they brought out their own passports and came back to England."

Arnold sighed and shook his head, but otherwise declined to comment on these machinations. "Well, I can't say I'm unhappy that Len died," he said. "Carrie's well out of it. But I do feel pretty dreadful about the Americans."

"It is dreadful," Bethancourt agreed. "Weldon's a brutal character. Funny, he doesn't look it at all. I actually thought he and his girlfriend were rather pleasant on the tour. I never suspected a thing."

They walked on in silence for a bit while the dogs chased each other up and down the lane.

"How's Carrie doing?" asked Bethancourt.

Arnold smiled. "She's terribly grateful to be let off and also horribly guilty about having taken up with Len in the first place. But she's resilient. She'll get over it. Everyone else is just relieved that it's all over. We're being especially nice to each other to make up for previous bad behavior."

"That's nice," said Bethancourt. "I'm glad it's worked out in the end."

"It wouldn't have if it hadn't been for you," said Arnold. "Thank you, Phillip."

Bethancourt shrugged the thanks away. "I didn't have much to do with this case beyond being a reliable witness. But I'll tell you what I did enjoy: I enjoyed being a suspect and being grilled by Kennick. It was quite an experience, that."

Arnold laughed at him. "You have strange tastes," he said. "Come on, we'd best turn back if we're to be in time for lunch."

They whistled for the dogs and began to make their way back to Rokeby House.

UNSOLVED

by
Robert Kesling

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

The answer will appear in the April issue.

The tall man standing before Captain Sharp's desk was apologetic. "I may be wasting your time, sir," he began. "It's probably nothing much, really." He hesitated.

"Go on," urged Sharp, anxious to get on with his work.

"Well . . . my name is Otto Graf, and there've been a lot of strange characters wandering in and out of my condominium. I own the Pleasant Valley condo—just six families, but it more than pays its way, if you know what I mean. And nothing like this ever happened before. My wife Hester noticed it, too. These visitors sort of sneak in and out, trying not to show their faces. Hester is certain there's something illegal going on, and she doesn't want our condo to get a bad reputation."

"She could be right," said Sharp, thinking how cocaine traffic had increased sharply lately. "Any way I can look over your tenants without seeming conspicuous?"

"We were thinking, sir—if it's not too much bother—we could throw a kind of party for them, and you could show up as a guest."

"I'll be there," promised Captain Sharp. "You can point out the various tenants to me."

He did not want to alarm Mr. Graf, but he had a report that a notorious underworld dealer nicknamed False-face Phil, a master of disguises, might have moved his operation into the city. "Phil" usually posed as a florist, but he had a dozen aliases.

As agreed, Captain Sharp drove out to the condominium the next night and was introduced as "Paul Perdue." A crowd had assembled on the patio, and the delicious aroma of broiled steaks was in the air. As they found seats apart from the tenants, Sharp asked, "What can you tell me about these people?"

"Well," replied his host, "the boom in the local economy has brought renters from all over. Each tenant comes from a different state—one even hails from Wyoming. Personally, I've found Ed to be a lot friendlier than the woman named Greta."

(1) As they savored their drinks, Graf whispered, "The three cou-

- ples swimming in the pool are Art, Bert, Cal, and their wives—Kathy, Mrs. Parks, and the lady from Tennessee.
- (2) “And the three couples clustered around the barbecue are Helen, Janice, Laura, and their husbands—Dan, the banker, and the man from Vermont.”
- (3) As supper was served to the hungry residents, the owner of the condo pointed out, “Those who are eating inside include Mrs. Nelson, Mrs. Olson, and Mrs. Queen, along with their husbands—Fred, the contractor, and Laura’s husband.
- (4) “However, the other three couples, those sitting yonder at the picnic table, are the women from Tennessee, Utah, and Texas. Their husbands are Art, Mr. Maris (who incidentally is not married to Janice), and the architect.”
- (5) After the steaks were consumed, three couples sat in the living room discussing politics. “They include,” Graf confided, “the architect, the dentist, and the florist, who are Cal, Mr. Nelson (who is not the man from South Carolina), and Isabel’s husband.
- (6) “And,” he continued, “the three couples enjoying a late swim are Helen, Janice, Kathy, and their husbands—Mr. Olson, the engineer, and the man from Utah.”
- (7) Captain Sharp was disappointed. He still hadn’t definitely identified the florist. Then he heard Art say to Mr. Raber, “That damned florist over there sold me wilted flowers.”

“Did the same to my wife,” commented Raber. “We’ll never trade with *him* again.”

Then Captain Sharp knew which man was the florist and what name he was using. He looked again—right height, right weight, and the hair color looked like a dye job. Yes, that man could only be False-face Phil, the fraudulent florist. The captain immediately arrested him for questioning.

*Whom did the captain arrest?
Under what name was the cocaine dealer operating?*

FICTION

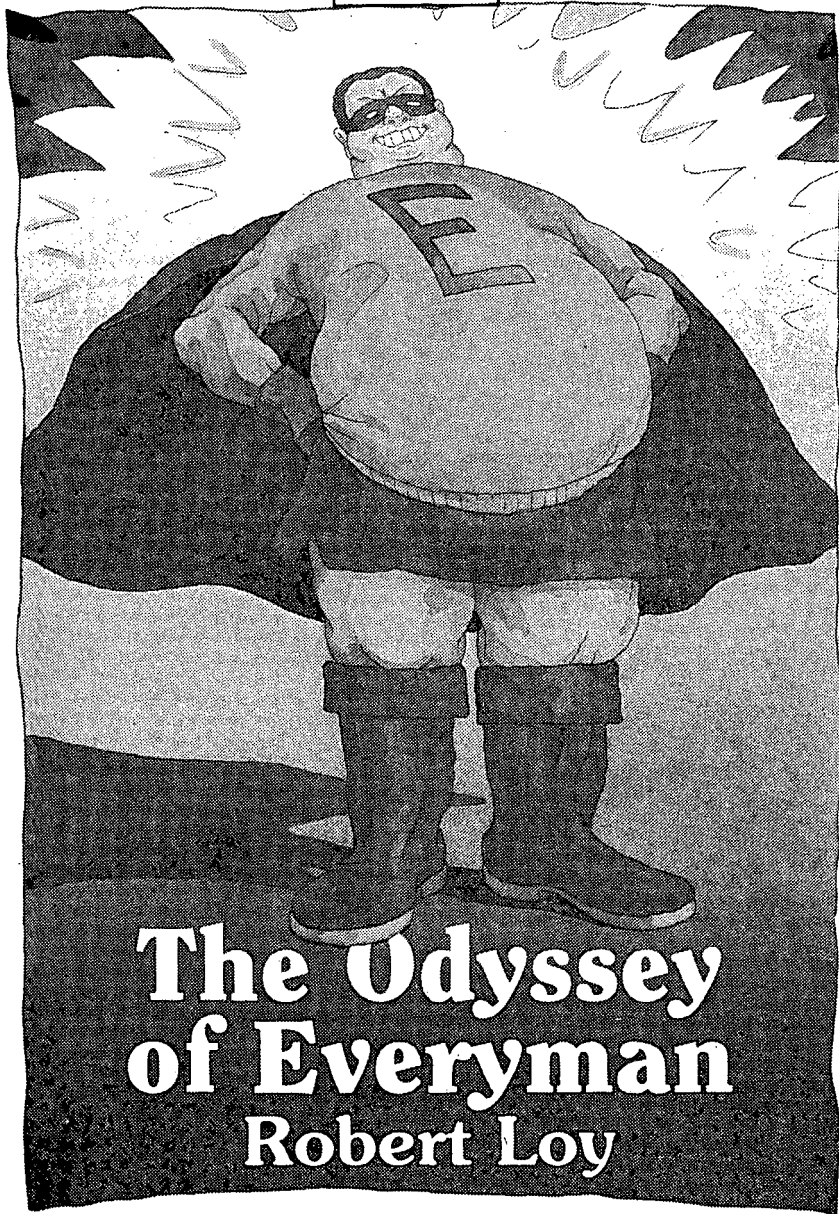


Illustration by Jim Adams

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
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I guess this epic saga of a modern day knight, the legend of me, really begins the summer I was seven years old. We were on vacation at Myrtle Beach, and it had been raining for three straight days when Dad bought me my first comic book—Fantastic Four Annual #6. I read that comic over and over till it literally fell apart in my hands. I taped it back together, of course. I knew that such an amazing work of art and imagination was unique and irreplaceable.

Or so I thought until I made a discovery that changed my life. At the drugstore right around the corner there were dozens of these newsprint miracles—each and every month.

Wow!

I felt as though I had gained admittance to a whole new world, a world where people were more colorful and brave and noble than they were in my mundane world. These were my kind of people. Two things happened on that magic day. Sales of Dr. Pepper, Milky Way candy bars, and Matchbox cars took a drastic nosedive as every cent of my future allowance went to the publishing houses of Marvel and DC Comics—twelve cents at a time. And I made up my mind what I was going to be when I grew up. I was going to be a costumed superhero, a card-carrying member of the Justice League and the Avengers, best friend of Batman, boyfriend of Supergirl.

My comic book companions became much better and truer friends than my real-life contemporaries of the playground. And no wonder. The Silver Surfer never chose me dead last—and reluctantly at that—for pick-up basketball games. Batman never gave me cruel nicknames like “Duck” because of the way I walk. Supergirl never laughed in my face when I asked if I could walk her home from school. Captain America never—

(No, I’d better not even get started on my grievances of growing up. Bestsellers are never a hundred and fifty thousand pages long.)

Well, anyway, somewhere along the line I gave up on my dream of Justice League membership, but I kept on reading. I’m thirty-three years old now, and I still read comic books—or at least I did until last summer. And what’s more, I’m not ashamed of that fact. Okay, okay, I admit I rented a storage unit for my back issues, but that was because I had so many they were running me out of my house. Plus, there’s such prejudice against us adult comic book readers, I thought it might be more prudent not to have them lying around where my ladyfriends might spot them and mistakenly

brand me a dweeb when they came over to see me—if I had any ladyfriends and if they ever came to see me.

(Scratch that last line—maybe the whole paragraph.)

Now, before you start stereotyping me, I think you should know that I am a college graduate. I have a respectable, fairly well-paying position in the accounting department of a major shipping company. (Whoa now, maybe I should just say I have a successful—no, I've got it—a glamorous career. Being any more specific is just going to make it easier for people to guess my secret identity.) The point is I am not a scrawny, nerdy loser who thinks pocket protectors are an essential fashion accessory and has not had a date since the eighth grade formal with Elaine Newberry, the new girl in school, who never spoke to me again afterwards.

I am not a semiliterate lunkhead. I also read real books, books without any pictures—well, I've read that *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations* book my Aunt Boo gave me when I graduated from high school—many times. (I mean, of course, that I've read it many times; I've only graduated from high school once. Make sure that's clear in the second draft.) As a matter of fact, up until recently my goal in life was to see my name in *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations*. But I don't know exactly how you do it. I mean, if you utter some immortal phrase, do you have to have a witness like you do to get in the *Guinness Book of World Records*? Or can you just call up Bartlett and say, "Hey, Bartlett, lend me your ears. I've got a hot one for you."

(Whoa, I don't like how this is going at all. Let's start over from the very beginning.)

I am a millionaire jet-set playboy. I date supermodels, vacation on the Riviera, and read comic books.

Something happened to comic books in the late seventies. Psychotic thugs in good-guy tights, guys like the Punisher, who shot the bad guys with a machine gun, and Wolverine, who sliced them to ribbons with his adamantium claws, exploded onto the newsstand and became enormously popular. Never mind the fact that they were no better than the bad guys they fought. They were followed by a slew of imitators, of course, but no problem. I didn't buy those comics. I still had my other friends.

I just didn't have them for long.

The influence of the "bad good guys" was everywhere, and now "good good guys" are unpopular, out of fashion. In fact, you can't even find one. They're all either dead or turned bad. My four-color

friends might have been impervious to bullets and bombs, but they were powerless against their bloodthirsty writers and editors.

There was nothing I could do to help them. I had to stand by and watch my decades-long companions fall. Supergirl, my first love, and the original Flash are both dead. Green Lantern lost his temper and his mind and destroyed an entire city. The Mighty Thor is also insane. They broke Bruce Wayne's back, and the new Batman is a trained killer with none of his predecessor's compunctions against taking a life.

And then last summer they killed Superman, the greatest hero of them all, my best friend. They had to, I guess. He was just too good to live in this era of villains-as-heroes. His murder was the biggest-selling Superman issue of all time. It was also the last comic book I will ever buy. (I understand they've brought him back to life now—too many merchandising deals to let him linger in limbo for too long—but he's hairier and meaner now, more "gritty" and "realistic." No doubt it won't be long before he goes out shopping for machine guns. He's not Superman. Not my Superman.)

(Come on, this preamble is really starting to ramble. Let's get to the good stuff—my superheroics. Toss in something from *Bartlett's* and let's get on with it, something like "All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing." Or, no, I've got a better one—)

"Whenever I want to read a great book I have to sit down and write one."

I don't know who said that—some writer of real books, probably—but I know just how he felt.

I couldn't find a good costumed superhero, so I decided to become one.

“**Y**ou wanna know what's wrong with the 1990's?" Greenbrier County Sheriff's Deputy Mitch Mahaffey said, stopping for yet another red light, much to the consternation of the other occupant of the cruiser. "I'll tell you what's wrong with the 1990's. What's wrong with the 1990's is that—"

"What's wrong with the 1990's," his partner Ralph Birdsong interrupted, "is that I've got me a date so hot she's probably gonna spontaneously combust if I'm late and you want to ride around philosophizing—and stopping to inspect every single stoplight in the state. Okay, this one works—it's green already, let's go."

"What's wrong with the 1990's," Mitch went on, "is that there's nobody who sets themselves apart from the rest of us, nobody to look up to and admire. Do you know who Eustace Tilley is?"

"No," Ralph said. "Do you know who Margarite Sommerset is? Do you have any idea how much money I've spent on flowers and cologne to get this goddess to break her never-date-a-cop rule?"

"Eustace Tilley is the guy on the cover of the *New Yorker* magazine every year during the last week in February. I know you've seen him, real high collar, top hat, he's always looking at a butterfly through his monocle or lorgnette, whatever you call that thing. A very sophisticated guy, you can tell that just by looking at him. He was kinda like their mascot, I guess you'd call it."

Ralph rolled his eyes. "Yeah, so?"

"So now he's been replaced by Elvis Tilley. A goddam moron with a backwards baseball cap, pierced ear, Adam's apple sticking out to here. He ain't interested in no butterflies, either. He's looking at a handbill from some live sex show. The guy is completely vacuous and apathetic. Not that he could spell or define vacuous or apathetic to save his stupid, pointless little life. And he's proud of his stupidity, that's the worst part about—"

"Come on, Mitch, don't use any of them twenty dollar words you love so much on me. I told you before those things can't live outside a book. Besides, I can't spell vacuous either. What's that prove?"

"It proves you ain't got no business being on the cover of the *New Yorker*, that's what it proves. Oh, and get this, I was reading in the paper today where there's a new book coming out about the Alamo. You remember the Alamo, right, Ralph? Davy Crockett, Jim Bowie, and those guys, Colonel Travis drawing that line in the dirt with his sword. Gave me goosebumps when I read about that as a kid—still does.

"Only this book says Colonel Travis was a schizophrenic syphilitic and he wore a girdle and he never drew that line—now, how would they know if he drew the line or not? Turns out Bowie and Crockett weren't fighting for Texas independence, they were fighting to keep the land they stole from the Mexicans and the gold they stole from the Apaches."

Ralph wasn't listening. The spotlight ahead of them was amber. "Mitch, if you stop for this one, I'm turning on the lights and the siren," he said. "I swear to God I will."

Mitch sighed and sped through it.

"I'm sorry, Mitch," Ralph said. "I just don't see what exactly it is you're upset about. Are you talking about covers of magazines nobody reads, whether or not the guys at the Alamo wore women's clothing, what?"

The truth was Mitch himself wasn't entirely sure what he was upset about. If he had to put a name to it, he would have said symbols or heroes, people who show us something inside themselves, and consequently in all of us, better or nobler than we see every day.

He couldn't understand how come we used to admire people who were smart or brave or talented and now we despise them. We have TV and the tabloids to drag anybody who dares to stand for something back down into the cesspool with us. He kept thinking about this poem he read one time that said, "The knight is dead, and we know it because we killed him. The troll is on the throne, and we know it because we put him there."

But he wasn't about to talk to his partner about poetry. Ralph thought he was weird enough already.

"I'm talking about my son Brady and all the other kids coming up nowadays. You know, I saw a poll the other day where young people picked the celebrities they admired most. You know who was number one?—Beavis and Butt-head. Jeez, what are the 2000's gonna be like if the best we can give our kids to look up to is goddam submoronic punks like Beavis and Butt-head?"

"See, there you go again," Ralph said. "Now why do you say 'submoronic' when what you mean is 'stupid'?"

"But I don't know," Mitch went on, "who else are they gonna look up to? Athletes? I don't think so. Remember how we idolized athletes when we were coming up? Now who's gonna admire those pampered crybabies who make five or six million dollars a year and still wanna charge a kid twenty bucks to scribble their name on a bubblegum card?"

Ralph still wasn't listening. He was probably rehearsing some of the old worn-out lines he was going to use on Margarite. They were almost to the station house when a little niggling thought at the back of Mitch's mind broke into the light.

"Hey, we forgot to run over to the church cemetery and see what the deal is there. It's only a coupla miles from here, why don't we—"

"Mitch, our shift is over. Give it a rest, all right?"

As he got out of the cruiser, Ralph said, "You know, Mitch, the real problem is not about Useless Tilley or Beavis and Butt-head or Randy Travis or anything like that. The problem is you—you're always reading and thinking. And you read and think way too much. Look right here on the side of the car. That's our whole job description right there—"To Serve and to Protect." Notice it doesn't say anything at all about thinking. Go home, buddy, knock back a coupla brewskis, relax. And wish me luck tonight with Margaritha. If things go the way I'm planning, I may be late tomorrow. Hell, I might not make it in at all."

Maybe Ralph was right, but as Mitch guided the cruiser back out into traffic and headed home, he couldn't've put the brakes on his brain if he'd wanted to. Everybody's always worrying about our dwindling national resources, he thought, but we've already run completely out of one commodity—heroes—and God knows we could use some.

We've taught our young people to just say no, but we haven't given them anything or anybody to say yes to. And kids with no respect for themselves or anything or anybody else are carrying guns to school so they can kill each other for their Nikes. Am I the only one who sees a connection?

And maybe things aren't that much worse anyway. I mean, when I was coming up, Robert Kennedy was my hero, and it really messed me up when he got shot. At least if there are no heroes, then nobody can get a black page in the history books for themselves by blowing one away. Still, looking up to Senator Kennedy and seeing something in him, maybe it wasn't even really there, inspired me and made me want to do whatever I could to make the world a little bit better. I still feel that way. Yeah, it's corny and old fashioned, but it's a damn sight better than the new nothing-matters-and-what-if-it-did fashion.

Later, trying to unwind a little with Thomas Berger's latest novel, his mind was still working. He was thinking about the Baptist church cemetery they didn't get around to today. That church was probably his town's only legitimate claim to fame. It had a huge stained glass window, the largest on the East Coast, or so Mitch had read somewhere, showing Jesus blessing the little children as angels watched approvingly from heaven. Somebody had gone out to that church last night—for the second time in two months—and vandalized the place, broken beer bottles, turned

over some old headstones, smeared mud on the door, Mitch didn't know what all.

Randall Savage, who worked midnights, said he thought it was probably the work of satanists. But Randy watched all those day-time TV talk shows; he thought beach erosion was the work of satanists. More likely, Mitch figured, since it was a predominantly African-American congregation, the vandalism was racially motivated, even though there was nothing overtly racist about it.

What bothered him most about this incident was that two men who could justifiably be called heroes—dead, of course, the way America seemed to like its heroes—were buried there: Michael Hedstrom, an astronaut who died in a space shuttle accident, and Evan Lincoln, a civil rights worker gunned down in his own front yard.

Later, lying in bed, trying to sleep and knowing it wasn't going to happen—sleep had come only fitfully these past few weeks and not at all the past three nights, so why should tonight be any different?—he was thinking about his ten-month-old son down the hall. Time had flown by so much faster since he'd come into Mitch's life. Soon Brady would be walking and exploring this screwed-up world, trying to decide who and what he was going to be.

And Mitch was racking his brain trying to think of one living person he'd want the boy to emulate, one person he'd be pleased to hear his son say, "Dad, when I grow up I want to be like him."

The clock struck eleven and then twelve, and Mitch was still thinking.

I made a list of what I needed to do to become a superhero, and the top three items on the agenda were 1) Diet, 2) Lose weight, and 3) Get in shape. I mean, I'm a realistic guy, and I knew the odds were probably against my getting bit by a radioactive spider or struck by lightning while I was carrying a tray of chemicals or something. So as much as I loved Superman and as much as I wished I could fly or have X-ray vision—especially X-ray vision. I even sent off one time for the X-ray specs they used to advertise in the back of comic books, but all they did was give me a headache. I couldn't see through anybody's dress. Two ninety-five down the drain—I was going to have to be more of the Batman/Captain America type of superhero, relying on strength and agility and superior intelligence to best the bad guys rather than superhuman abilities. And what with my jet-set lifestyle and dating all those

supermodels and everything, I've let myself get just the teeniest bit out of shape.

(Change "anybody's dress" in the last paragraph to "the enemy agent's briefcase" or something less pervo-sounding.)

But I don't know, there were so many equally important but lots more fun things on my list that physical training sort of took a back burner. Besides, I'm not in that bad a shape. I see people on the street every day who are fatter than me—well, maybe not every day but frequently. That guy I read about in the *National Enquirer* who couldn't get out of bed without a crane, he was a lot fatter.

Besides, I'm sure nobody expects a fearless defender of truth and justice to whip up on the enemies of democracy with nothing in his belly but a shake for breakfast, a shake for lunch, and a sensible dinner.

Like a costume. I had to have a costume. Something to scare the pants off the bad guys and look sharp and dashing in the newspaper the next morning. I didn't think that was going to be difficult, but it was. After spending pretty much my whole life savings at the fabric store—why the heck is Spandex so expensive?—I discovered that those reds and yellows and greens that look so great in Metropolis and Gotham City are way too loud and garish in this world. I mean, the element of surprise was going to be a large part of my arsenal, and it's really hard to sneak up on somebody when you're fluorescent.

Not only that, but my sewing skills are just a notch or two above nonexistent. I wish now I'd taken home economics in high school instead of woodworking, but then of course Mom wouldn't have that lovely bookcase—or knickknack thingamajig—I made her.

And I couldn't hire a professional seamstress, even if I'd had enough money after buying all that Spandex to throw away, because then she would know my secret identity.

I ended up getting most of my costume from the Salvation Army thrift store and my own closet. A pair of gray sweat pants, black gym shorts over them, and a dark blue sweatshirt pretty much took care of the basics. It was vaguely Batmanish, but it was quite a bit looser than most of my fellow superheroes are wearing them this season. I reminded myself that it was okay if my costume wasn't exactly form-fitting. My job was to apprehend evil-doers, not impress women with my tights-clad body. Still, if I thought my tights-clad body would impress—(No, no, new paragraph.)

It's the accessories that really make a costume, after all. And here I went all out—black knee-high boots (they were my Uncle Gene's old fishing boots and still smelled strongly of flounder, but they looked sharp, and that's what counts), black gloves, a huge long scary cape (definitely my favorite part, I love capes, all of us superheroes love capes), and, of course, a mask. The mask was really tough. Like I said before, I'm not much with a needle, so it ended up having a lot more stitches than I had originally envisioned. It looked sort of like Catwoman's in the second Batman movie, only threadier.

I wished I could get away with disguising myself just by taking off my glasses like Superman does—or at least that I could wear my glasses under my mask. It would be nice to see more than a foot or two in front of me. Oh well, I figured it would be dark when I did my superheroing, so the crooks would probably be just as blind.

My new name was even harder. There's been a slew of new comic book superheroes, so all the good names—and quite a few of the crummy ones—were already taken. I filled up a couple of loose-leaf notebooks with possible names and ended up rejecting every one of them.

I finally decided to call myself Everyman, for three reasons. 1) I really liked the sound of it. 2) I already had a big green *E* to sew on my chest from when I lettered in high school singing bass in the chorus; I never got to wear it, of course, because the football players would beat up any nonathletes who wore letters to school. (God, I hate football players. I hoped some of them had turned to crime so I could whip up on them.) And 3) I wanted people to know that I wasn't a strange visitor from another planet despite what Hal Jones and those guys in high school used to say. I was just an ordinary guy with extraordinary courage, a heroic heart, and a really cool cape.

Now I was all set. All I needed was some bad guys to bring to justice. But on my exploratory plainclothes missions around the neighborhood I found that criminals have at least one thing in common with cops—namely, you can never find one when you want one. I did see one guy trying to open an apartment door down the hall with a credit card, but for all I knew he lived there and just accidentally locked himself out. If this had been Gotham City, he would have worn a costume with a big *B* for Burglarman on his chest.

I was eager to get to work, and I figured that once I was in costume I wouldn't have to look for trouble, trouble would find me. So I donned the fearsome garb of Everyman and ventured out into the night.

Finally Mitch figured anything was better than lying there, tossing and turning and keeping his wife Kimberly awake. So he got up, grabbed his badge, a flashlight, and a pair of cuffs. After debating with himself for a few seconds he decided to take his .38 with him, too. Then he hopped into the cruiser and headed over to the churchyard.

He didn't really expect to find anything—even cross burners and devil worshippers aren't stupid enough to vandalize the same place two nights in a row—and in this assumption he was not disappointed. The bulbs in the church's lightpoles had all been broken out, but after shining his halogen around the cemetery he could see that everything was cleaned up and quiet. A few of the headstones were slightly damaged, but he was happy to see that Lincoln's and Hedstrom's were not among them.

Maybe that was the only reason he had come, just to make sure they were all right. Nobody had dug them up and thrown stones at them for daring to be better than mediocre like they did to Jim Bowie and Davy Crockett. And the Kennedys. And Martin Luther King.

All of a sudden Mitch realized he was completely exhausted, but it was a good kind of tired; he just hoped he would be able to keep it alive till he got home. Three or four hours of sleep would do him a world of good.

Just as he was turning to go, he heard a noise in the one place he had not explored—the treetops over his head. He thought at first it was just a squirrel with insomnia, but the way the limbs were rustling, it would have to be a squirrel the size of a rhinoceros.

And now the limbs weren't rustling—they were cracking and breaking. What the hell was up there? Mitch tried but couldn't quite get a beam on it. It looked sort of like a bear, but there were no bears in this part of the country, were there? And he knew for sure there weren't any bears that said, "All right, villain, here I come. Expect no mercy," like this one did.

Mitch's flashlight finally found him. The beast was huge, and for some reason it had a big black parachute tied to its back. Mitch supposed it wasn't so unusual that a parachuting bear had lost his

bearings and landed in a tree, but what in the world was a bear doing skydiving in the first place?

Before he had time to figure it out, the bear leaped out of the tree and would have landed right on Mitch's head if his parachute hadn't got stuck in the lower branches. The beast hung there suspended in his self-made stranglehold, kicking wildly and clawing at the noose around his neck. Mitch instinctively reached up to help him, but one of the struggling grizzly's kicks caught him in the left temple and he fell to the ground.

The miscreant was audacious, I'll give him that, shining his flashlight all over like that, no doubt looking for the best site to perform his evil rituals. But as somebody once said—probably Shakespeare; old Shakespeare's got his name in the book so much he must have been blackmailing Bartlett—"if 'twere done . . . something something . . . then you better do it quickly." And I did. I swooped down on the dastardly morgue molester—a swoop Batman himself would have been proud of—and laid him low with one mighty blow from my boot.

I didn't immediately light into him, however, because I wanted to give him a chance to recover so I could beat him fair and square, and also because I needed time to consider making some modifications to my costume. I mean, come to think of it, a lot of really cool hero guys don't wear capes. Captain America doesn't wear a cape. Heck, the Silver Surfer doesn't wear anything at all. So halfway down I took mine off and left it there in the tree, just before it choked me to death.

(Change to "just in time to face the foul evil-doer just now struggling to his feet.")

Mitch had made it to his knees and was shaking his head when the bear freed himself from his parachute and landed on him like a ton of grizzly, completely knocking the breath out of him. The beast then rolled down an incline and would have landed in an open grave had he not caught himself at the last second.

Now Mitch could see that it was not a bear or a mutant squirrel that had bushwhacked him after nearly committing suicide with a parachute. It was a man, a great huge fat man with a lopsided capital *E* on his chest. He was wearing a mask and sweat pants, and he reeked of fish.

Mitch was still dazed and his body was as yet unsure how to breathe, so he was completely at this strange fat man's mercy. The moon had come out from behind a cloud, but the man in the mask was stumbling around bumping into headstones and wrestling with flower arrangements. He might have been blind, but he definitely was not mute. He was hollering out, "Desist, villain!" and "You can't hide from justice" and other stuff Mitch had never heard anywhere but in really old, really bad movies. Finally he swung at something that wasn't there, lost his balance, and landed flat on Mitch's back. Now the policeman was not only breathless but pinned to the ground.

But now that I'd apprehended the evil-doer, what was I going to do with him? Spider-man wraps his bad guys up in a web for the cops to come pick up later, but I didn't have any web-shooters on my costume. I didn't have a Batmobile or anything either, so it looked like I was going to have to walk my man to the police station, which seemed kind of low-rent and unprofessional—not to mention dangerous. What was going to happen when he caught his breath? I couldn't keep falling on him every few minutes.

The guardian angel of modern day good-good-guy superheroes must have been watching over me, because out of nowhere a pair of handcuffs materialized, and after I'd dropped them twice, I wasted no time in slapping them on the bad guy's wrists. They slipped off, but I put them back on tighter.

The villain kept trying to tell me something, and even though I couldn't make any of his huffing into words, I thought I knew what he was saying. To paraphrase Leo Tolstoy (well, no, that won't work here, but it is definitely time for another—past time—for another great quote.). Anyway, bad guys are all alike is what I'm trying to say.

"Put a sock in it," I told him. "You'll get your chance to tell your story to the judge after the police get here and—"

"I am the police, you moron!" Mitch yelled at him.

Well, that might have worked on a lesser superhero, but I had done my homework. I saw some punk try this same trick on Spider-man.

"Yeah, sure, buddy, and I'm the Easter bunny," I told him. "If you're a cop where's your shield?" (Maybe I should explain here for my younger fans that "shield" is coptalk for badge. I don't want any young people thinking that cops identify themselves by carrying around the same thing Captain America carries around.)

"It's in my wallet, dummy, where else would it be? And how am I supposed to get it? I'm handcuffed—and you are in big trouble."

Well, that's not exactly what the punk said when Spider-man called his bluff, but a bluff it was, I had no doubt. I guess we just have a ballsier class of crook here in this town. I grabbed his wallet out of his back pocket and opened it. A silver star engraved with our county motto reflected the moonlight.

(And now I've got a problem, cuz this does not sound heroic at all. I know anybody can mess up a little the first time out of the gate and everything, but assaulting one of my allies in the war against crime is—no, it's okay. I've got it—)

It wasn't easy to see what had happened here, but my trained criminologist mind saw it all right away. Much like some firemen who like to commit arson every now and then, just so they'll have job security, I guess, this cop had gone renegade and was moonlighting as a crook.

Soandso said, "Such and such." (Find an appropriate quote from *Bartlett's* to go here in the second draft.) A cop turned to the dark side, just like a good guy with a machine gun, was much worse than your common, garden-variety bad guy. I looked this scum dead in his beady little eyes and said—

"Uh, um, I'm sorry, officer. It's—it's all a horrible mistake. Say, you're not going to arrest me for picking your pocket now, are you? I mean, you told me to get your wallet."

"You idiot! By the time you get through serving your sentence for assaulting a police officer, you'll be so senile you won't even care about another year or two for pickpocketing."

But then Mitch started to feel sorry for the poor crackpot, who looked like he was about to cry. He had no idea why he was out here or why he was dressed like a ballet dancer on a very tight budget, why he was wearing a mask or why he smelled like low tide at the marsh, but he was no criminal. He wasn't smart enough to be destructive.

"Look, just unlock the cuffs and we'll—"

"Oh God, I am so sorry, this is all a terrible mistake. I don't blame you a bit for being angry. Here, I'll unlock these and let you out, won't take but a—whoops. Now, geez, did you see where that key landed?"

Just to show this violator of the public trust what I thought of his foul black deeds I took the handcuff key and dropped (no, "hurled") it into a big hole with a tent over it but no coffin in it, probably where some guy changed his mind at the last minute and decided not to die after all, you know how thoughtless people are these days.

"So help me God, if you don't get that key out of that grave and get these handcuffs off me in the next five seconds I am going to—what was that?"

"What was what? I didn't hear anything."

Voices, talking softly but laughing loudly, came through the woods and into the clearing of the churchyard.

"Right over there." Mitch pointed with his chin, but the masked man was looking everywhere except where—I shoulda known it, thought the policeman—a trio of high school boys were popping hot beers and cracking dumb jokes.

My keen ears picked up a sound. The renegade cop's band of tombstone terrorists made their way into the churchyard. There must have been at least a dozen of them, but fear was not in Everyman's vocabulary. I knew what I had to do. And so, without even a cape to whoosh around, I walked out to face the bad guys.

"Hey, where are you—" Mitch whispered, but it was too late. The masked man had already walked up to the boys, tripped over a root or something, and landed unceremoniously on the torn-denim lap of the tallest boy there. Mitch could smell the spilt Old Milwaukee on the boy's Metallica T-shirt and jeans all the way from where he was standing handcuffed and helpless in a dark corner of the cemetery.

My philosophy in tackling a mob of dangerous criminals is to take out the biggest guy first, and that was what I did. He never even saw me coming.

"Hey, you clumsy idiot, look what you did. What are you doing here anyway?"

"I am Everyman. I know you haven't heard of me yet, but you will. I'm going to be a famous crimefighter. Now, if you fellas will just come along peaceably, I won't have to hurt y'all. I know you outnumber me, but remember, I have justice on my side."

Mitch didn't know what planet the guy who called himself Everyman came from, but he was the corniest guy he had ever met—and the clumsiest—and quite possibly the stupidest. Those boys he was challenging were definitely not the high school glee club. Mitch had seen kids like those shoot people for lesser offenses than beer spilling. He had to try to deal with that type of kid every day—the ones he had been trying to tell Ralph about, the ones with nothing and nobody to believe in. The kind he did not want Brady to grow up to be like. The generation without heroes.

They were going to tear this guy up.

Mitch didn't know how to reach those kids either, but he did know you weren't going to get very far by saying, "It is my duty to ask you young fellas to cease and desist this trespassing and vandalism. I know you think it's not a major crime, but it's a perilous road you're on, and believe me, you don't want to walk down it. Why, I wouldn't be surprised if Al Capone and the Joker and Lex Luthor all started their criminal careers with something minor like this kind of graveyard hooliganism."

The boys just stared at him for a few seconds, then at each other, before bursting out in hysterical derisive laughter.

"Bug off," said the tall one, the boy whose beer the guy in the mask had spilled, as he popped another Old Milwaukee.

"Yeah, get back to the nuthouse," said a greasy-haired boy with a ring in his nose and a tattoo he must have been very proud of, judging by the way he had only one sleeve pushed up. "It's gotta be time for your medication."

Well, I gave the lads a stirring little pep talk, but it didn't do any good. Sad to think that boys so young could already be solidly sold on the path of lawlessness. Now the time had come for action. I walked (no, fearlessly strode) up to the boy I had tripped over earlier (no, the boy I figured was the leader of this vicious gang), grabbed the beer out of his hand, and poured it out on the ground.

"Hey, what the hell is wrong with you? That's two beers of mine you spilled."

"Two beers you no doubt obtained illegally, young man. What would your mother think if she could see you now, drinking and cursing like that?"

The tall boy grabbed Everyman by the throat and pulled him up close to his acne-pitted face.

"Listen, dude, nobody tells me what I can and can't drink. Nobody tells me nothing, got it? Especially not some lardass creep in a K Mart-reject Halloween costume."

This seemed to really offend the masked man. He puffed his chest out as best he could, considering he had no access to oxygen, and squeaked, "I didn't buy it at K Mart. I made it myself."

"Shut up, man. Just leave me alone, and don't ever try to tell me what to do."

"You tell him, Tunka," the third kid—a gawky boy with combat boots, a reverse mohawk haircut, and a Mortal Kombat T-shirt—shouted. "Why don't you kick his ass one time."

Tunka evidently thought his friend's advice was good, for the next minute he hauled off and hit the masked man in the solar plexus. Everyman hit the ground so hard and lay there so still Mitch thought for a minute he might be dead. But there was nothing he could do to help him. Oh, he could probably work his hands around enough to grab his .38, but handcuffed like he was, he couldn't aim it at anything higher than his feet. And Mitch could just imagine what would happen if an unarmed, handcuffed cop walked into the middle of that little party.

So all he could do was watch and wince as the boy kicked the costumed guy in the stomach, popped open two more beers, poured one all over Everyman, and took a big chug out of the other one.

But Everyman still hadn't had enough punishment. And even though Mitch was silently screaming at him to stay down, he struggled to his feet—only to get knocked down again with a couple of quick, wicked kidney punches from Tunka and a kick in the behind from the boy in the reverse mohawk.

Of course he was only a teenager, not a supervillain, so I took it pretty easy on him. Still, that kind of strenuous activity on a superhero who had led a fairly sedentary millionaire playboy type of life up until then took its

toll. Of course I could have easily defeated the entire gang in a fight, but would that really teach them a lesson? Superman never beat up anybody weaker than him. I lay there on the ground. (I mean, stood there waiting for my opponent to recover enough for round two) thinking there must be a better way to reach those young fellas than with violence.

This time the guy had to be down for the count. He just lay in a big heap on the ground, and Mitch was straining his ears to hear him moan or cry, something to show that he was still alive. He, of course, got no sympathy from the boys, who just threw their empty beer cans at him and called him names as they ransacked the wallet they'd lifted from his back pocket.

Mitch was just about to try to make his way to the cruiser and figure out how to work the radio with his hands behind his back so he could get hold of an ambulance when the man in the mask surprised him yet again.

Without any warning he leapt to his feet, screamed like a banshee, and started doing a lot of pseudo kung fu kicks in the air, jumping much higher than a guy his size had a right to. If Everyman had had a mind to start with, he'd definitely lost it now, Mitch thought.

He grabbed the tattooed boy and the boy in the reverse mohawk, cracked their heads together Three Stooges style, and pulled them both up off the ground.

"Yessss," he hissed in their stunned faces. "I see the error of my ways now. I want to be like you. I want to be evil. Let me join your band of desperadoes. I want to be ee-vill!"

Then he dropped them back on the ground and whirled over to the tall boy, the one they called Tunka. He held out his hand like he was reaching for his band-of-desperadoes membership card, but Tunka just stared at him.

"Come on, I want to be like you. I want to shave parts of my head, tattoo my body, scare women and children. I want to litter and vandalize churchyards like a real tough don't-give-a-darn kind of guy. Give me a chance, Tunka."

And he spun, screamed, "Hii-yaaah!," and kicked a fist-sized chunk out of an ancient tombstone.

The boys stood still, saying nothing. Mitch knew just how they felt. He was too stupefied to move, too.

"What's the problem?" Everyman said. "You think I might not be sincere in my desire to be a bad guy? You think a trace of the old virtue and righteousness might still remain? Well, you're wrong, just watch this."

It was like someone else was controlling my body as I bent down and felt around till I found that piece of rock or old cement I had kicked out of the tombstone a minute before. Whatever it was it was darn hard. I was pretty sure I had broken my big toe, but I didn't want Tunka and the fellas to know that.

I tossed the piece of stone in my hand a few times, just to get the heft of it. Then I hurried toward the front of the church, took aim, and drew back to throw it at the stained glass window of Jesus and the angels and the little children.

"No!" Mitch screamed and ran out into the moonlit clearing. He didn't know how he was going to stop that psycho. He didn't even care what those young punks did to him now. Nothing mattered except saving that beautiful stained glass window.

It was a race, and Everyman had the advantage of a sizable headstart. Not only that, but Mitch quickly discovered that for some reason having your hands bound slows your legs down. There was no way he was going to be able to catch Everyman in time.

But what else could he do? He had to try. Maybe if he could distract him, then get close enough to—but no, it was too late.

Everyman had his arm back and the rock was about to be launched at its target when the boy called Tunka ran up behind him, grabbed his hand, and said, "Hey, man, don't do that. That ain't right."

The man in the mask looked at him for a long minute.

"What did you say?"

Tunka furrowed his brow like he was trying to figure out why he had said what he did. And then he repeated it. "I said, put down the rock, dude. You got no reason to go and bust that window."

The masked man dropped the rock.

Mitch took a breath—his first in quite a while—and the three boys backed away from Everyman like zoogoers who suddenly notice the lion's cage is unlocked. If they'd noticed Mitch at all, they gave no indication of it.

*

Well, I wanted to do a few more karate kicks in celebration, but I was pretty sure I'd pulled a groin muscle. I didn't even know I had muscles in my groin. I figured I'd better wrap up this little get-together before the durned thing snapped completely and shot out of my sweat pants and into the woods.

"I'm kind of bushed," said the guy in the mask. "I think I'm going to head on home. How about you fellas?"

A moment's hesitation. A silent visual consultation. Then: "Yeah, man," they said in unison. "Home. Let's go home. Home sounds good."

Everyman cleared his throat. "Don't forget to clean up your mess before you go. I know you boys want to be good campers and leave this place looking better than you found it."

"What?" Tunka put that stare that only teenagers can do on him, the stare that says, "Are you completely out of your mind?"

But only for a moment.

"Yeah, okay, whatever you say. Let's pick up these beer cans, dudes." And they gathered up their mess and went home.

Now, I know what you're sitting on the edge of your chair breathlessly wondering—what would have happened if that boy named Tunka (and mothers and fathers in my reading audience, let this be a lesson to you: you're only asking for trouble if you name your son Tunka) hadn't stayed my hand? Would I have actually thrown that rock?

No. I don't know exactly what I would have done if he hadn't, but I would never have thrown a rock at a stained glass window.

There was only one thing left for me to do, and I wasn't looking forward to it. I lied to you earlier. The man I'd handcuffed was not a renegade cop. He was just a cop doing his job. And now I had to be a good citizen and take my punishment.

Oh well, I was so high now nothing could bring me down. Not only was I a genuine full-fledged hero, but I had initiated Tunka into the ranks. And with any luck at all I'd still be young enough to superhero around a little when I got out of the big house.

I took off my mask as I walked back over to the cop for two reasons, 1) it was itching like blazes, and 2) I'd made the eyeholes a little small, and I needed to see what I was doing. Of course I was taking a chance that the cop would give away my secret iden-

tity, but a secret identity is probably not that important in the pokey anyway.

I borrowed the cop's flashlight from his belt, jumped down in the grave, felt around until I found the key, then headed over to face the music.

"Wow, did you see that? Was I great or what? I mean, those kids were—oh yeah, the handcuffs. There you go. I apologize again, officer, I meant no harm."

"Yeah, well," Mitch said, "let me just tell you something about that, buddy. You are without a doubt the—"

"That's all right," Everyman interrupted. "I know what you're going to tell me. I have the right to remain silent. Anything I say will be used against me. I don't care. I understand my rights and I waive them. I want to make a statement."

Mitch shook his head. "Oh yeah, what's that?"

Everyman hesitated.

"Well, don't you have a notepad or something to immortalize this in? I think this might be it. Okay, okay, here it is—if you want to read a great book, sometimes you have to help someone else write one."

Doggone it, if this was a comic book, the cop would have turned out to be Officer Bartlett and he would have put me in his book, maybe even put my quote on the front cover, but of course it wasn't a comic book, it was real life—probably without parole.

And, I don't know, maybe I hadn't really transformed that boy into a hero, but because of me he had done one noble act, and maybe he would regret it for the rest of his life, but he could never take it back. Even if he was noble and heroic for only a moment, it was a shining moment, and it was a moment that would last forever inside of me, and the memory of it would keep me warm during those long, chilly months in the hoosegow.

Mitch's definition of a hero was a guy who believed in something bigger than himself and was willing to do anything to be true to that thing.

But maybe I need to rework that, Mitch thought. As it stands now, there's not much difference between a hero and a kook. He was not at all sure which—if either—this Everyman guy was, but

it was a sure bet he was not going to meet his like again any time soon.

"All right," Mitch told him, "you stay right here. I gotta take care of some paperwork in the cruiser before I take you downtown. You got it?"

"Okay," Everyman said.

Mitch walked over to the cruiser and spent a few minutes trying to rub some feeling back into his wrists. When he finished his massage and headed back to take one last quick check of the area, he couldn't believe his eyes. Everyman was still standing there where he'd left him, just calmly waiting to be arrested.

"Hey, look," the policeman told him, "don't you realize when I said I was going to go do something else, that was your cue to take off?"

"Oh," he said. "No, I didn't know that."

He turned to go but then stopped and said, "Say, listen, we work pretty well together, don't you think? Maybe we can get together and crack another case. You know we could be like—"

"I don't think so," Mitch said. "Once was more than—"

"—Batman and Commissioner Gordon. Well, I don't have anything like a bat signal or a supersonic watch like Superman gave Jimmy Olsen but—"

"Forget it," Mitch tried again.

"—you could call me on the radio. I have this really cool police scanner with all the different channels and—"

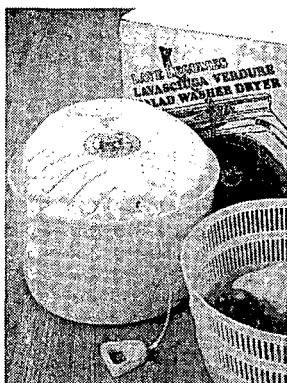
"No! Now get out of here before I change my mind and haul you in."

Well, he wanted to call the mayor and give me a medal and the key to the city and all that, but I don't do it for the glory, I do it because I am Everyman. I put my mask back on, silently recited my great quotation a couple of times so I wouldn't forget it before I had a chance to call old Bartlett, and took off for home.

The next morning Ralph Birdsong, his date with Margarite a disaster, came in to work early, ready with a load of lies to tell his partner about the previous evening. But Mitch Mahaffey didn't make it to work till late in the morning.

He overslept.

MAIL ★ ORDER ★ MALL

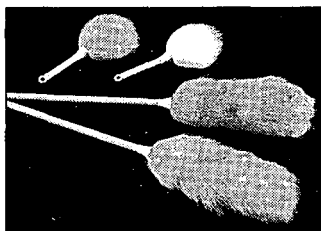


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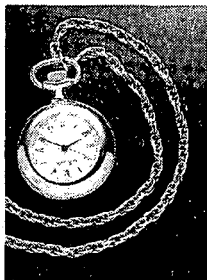
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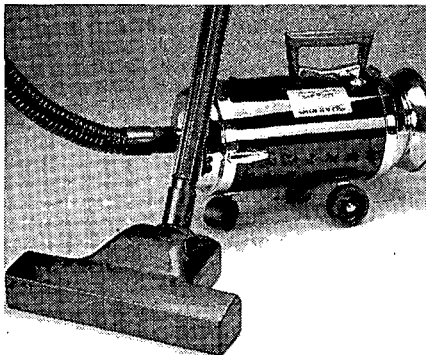
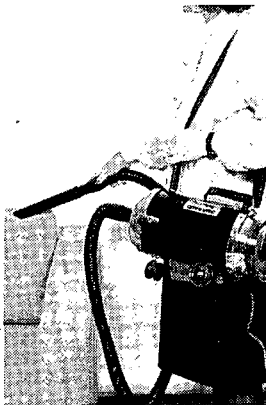
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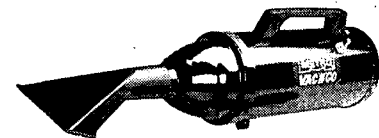
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FICTION

A MEMBERSHIP AT THE CLUB

Patricia Moorhead



Illustration by Judith Holman

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Thank you, doctor, I'm quite comfortable here. My room is small, but the other bed is empty so it's almost like having a private suite. There are a few things they won't let me have, of course. Some of the other patients stare at me when they think I'm not looking, which I'm certain will pass in time. Anyway, it's a lot better here than it was in jail.

We will talk about Ralph if that's what you wish. Please understand, doctor, I haven't changed my mind since our last chat. Ralph was to blame. And that's that.

It all began as I told you, with my yearly exam. My pressure was up, and I had gained fifteen more pounds. Dr. Manning said if I didn't lose thirty pounds by Christmas he wouldn't accept me as a patient any longer. Dr. Manning was really mad at me. So when Ralph gave me a membership at the club I thought he was doing something terribly nice to help me.

On my first visit I went into the Sportte Shoppe and bought one of those aerobic dance suits to work out in. You can picture what it looked like on me, but I'm sure you'd rather not. No waist, no neck, just like a turtle. The people at the Shoppe assured me I looked fine. Ha!

Then that little aerobic dance teacher came forward to give me the Grand Tour. She showed me the sauna and the steam room and the hot tub with the Jacuzzi. We went upstairs to the weight room where she weighed me and took my measurements. She planned my personal regime tailored for weight loss. She buzzed all around me with her blasted measuring tape while I stood there feeling like a baby whale. As for herself, she had a twenty-four inch waist and little bitty boobs that didn't shake when she bounced. I hated her on sight. You know, doctor, I used to have a real good figure. Back at Washington High they always said I had the best shape in the whole school. I was pretty, too. Lots prettier than she is. That's why Ralph fell in love with me.

It is hard to describe how I felt in the exercise class, working out beside a group of skinny women while wearing those pink and aqua tights. I thought to myself, I'm doing this for Ralph. He's already spent a lot of money on my membership. Wait until he gets the bill for this spiffy outfit. We discussed all this last week, remember? I'm tired of going over it again and thinking about that room full of people gyrating like hedonists.

The aerobic dance teacher kept leading us faster and faster. Throw your hiney this side, throw your hiney back, reach and twist, kick and squat. I could hardly touch my knees, never mind the floor. The music was loud and throbbing. I remember my head felt like it had too much blood in it. I had trouble seeing things. My heart pounded harder than I thought possible. I kept repeating to myself, I'm doing this for Ralph.

I have only a vague recollection of the locker room after class—taking a shower and sitting in the sauna with rivers of sweat pouring out of me. Then I floated in the hot tub for awhile and cooked in the steamer awhile. Hot. Hot. Everything was so hot. I also remember sitting on the bench in the locker room trying to dry myself but the towel was all wet. My clothes stuck to me like glue. I finally got dressed with a great deal of effort. The main problem was I couldn't seem to get enough air. There was a stabbing pain in my head when I bent over to put my shoes on. It didn't last long, thank heavens.

Somebody came over and asked if I was all right. I said I was okay, but I had to sit there awhile longer before I could get up.

It was when I started to comb my hair that I got a good look in the mirror. At first I didn't recognize my own reflection. It scared me a little with its puffy eyes and splotchy red cheeks. The lips looked grey, like a cadaver's. You've seen bread dough when it's risen too long? That's what my skin looked like all over. I couldn't take the stress the club was handing out. It would kill me. Literally. Then it became suddenly clear that Ralph had gone and fallen in love with my aerobic dance teacher. He and she were in cahoots to do me in. As I thought about it, a wind of anger rushed over me like a holocaust, hot like a sauna but ten times hotter. Lucky for me there was a bubble of cool in the center. All I had to do was stay in that cool place and I was safe from the heat.

Don't ask me how I drove home because I don't know how I did it. I know I saw different things with each eye. All the world surrounded me with double images. All the sounds had double shapes. When I got home, I saw two Ralphs standing there smiling, asking how did it go. He was double! He could indeed be having an affair with the dance teacher and at the same time be home with me so I would never suspect.

But I was cleverer than he gave me credit for.

The gun was my own. It was one of the first things they took away from me when the police came. I've had the gun a long, long time. My father gave it to me for my birthday the year I was twenty. They have no right to keep it.

Well, yes, I have lost weight, doctor, I've dropped maybe twenty-five pounds so far. Thank you for noticing. The food here isn't like my own cooking.

We will talk again next week if you want, but I assure you you won't change my mind. It was all Ralph's fault. Really.

SOLUTION TO THE FEBRUARY "UNSOLVED":

The young traitor was Jorge Undino, code name Darter, posing as an engineer. He came from Yubba. (In one way or another, the other two assistants are proved innocent.)

CODE	NAME	COVER	COUNTRY
Alligator	Luis Tamaro	farmer	Xanta
Bass	Isaac Suarez	banker	Yubba
Cayman	Karlos Waledo	clerk	Zigal
Darter	Jorge Undino	engineer	Yubba
Eel	Manuel Rogale	artist	Xanta
Fish	Juan Valdez	dealer	Zigal

MYSTERY CLASSIC

Consequences

Willa Cather

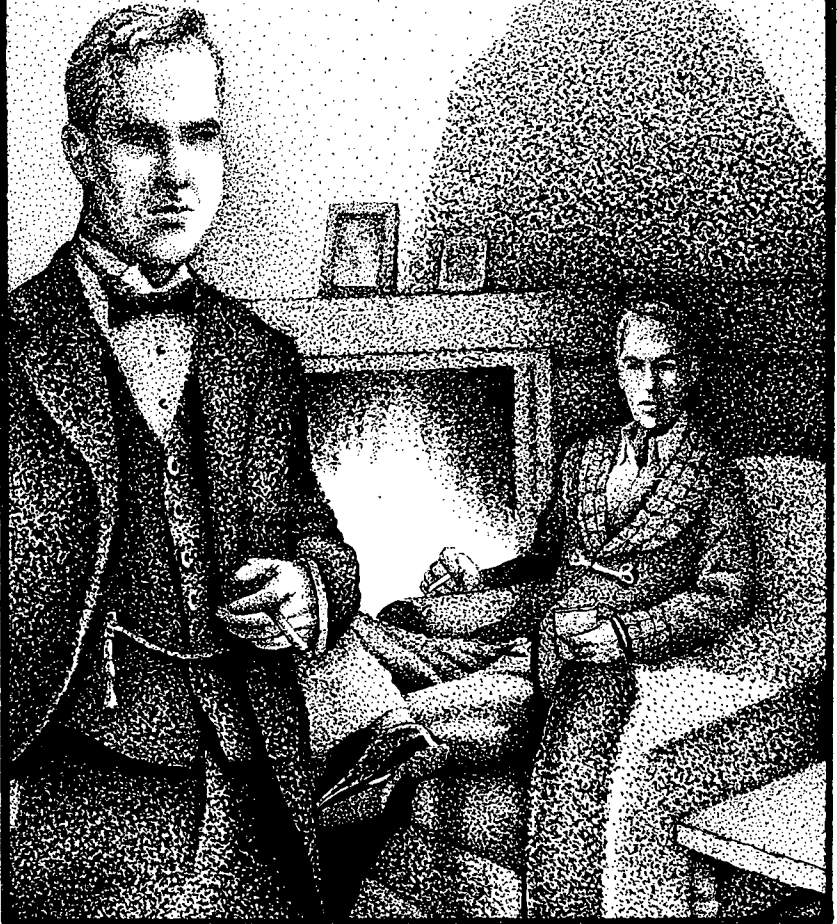


Illustration by Mark Penta

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Henry Eastman, a lawyer, aged forty, was standing beside the Flatiron Building in a driving November rainstorm, signaling frantically for a taxi. It was six thirty, and everything on wheels was engaged. The streets were in confusion about him, the sky was in turmoil above him, and the Flatiron Building, which seemed about to blow down, threw water like a millshoot. Suddenly, out of the brutal struggle of men and cars and machines and people tilting at each other with umbrellas, a quiet, well-mannered limousine paused before him, at the curb, and an agreeable, ruddy countenance confronted him through the open window of the car.

"Don't you want me to pick you up, Mr. Eastman? I'm running directly home now."

Eastman recognized Kier Cavanaugh, a young man of pleasure, who lived in the house on Central Park South where he himself had an apartment.

"Don't I?" he exclaimed, bolting into the car. "I'll risk getting your cushions wet without compunction. I came up in a taxi, but I didn't hold it. Bad economy. I thought I saw your car down on Fourteenth Street about half an hour ago."

The owner of the car smiled. He had a pleasant, round face and round eyes, and a fringe of smooth yellow hair showed under the brim of his soft felt hat. "With a lot of little broilers fluttering into it? You did. I know some girls who work in the cheap shops down there. I happened to be downtown, and I stopped and took a load of them home. I do sometimes. Saves their poor little clothes, you know. Their shoes are never any good."

Eastman looked at his rescuer. "Aren't they notoriously afraid of cars and smooth young men?" he inquired.

Cavanaugh shook his head. "They know which cars are safe and which are chancy. They put each other wise. You have to take a bunch at a time, of course. The Italian girls can never come along; their men shoot. The girls understand, all right; but their fathers don't. One gets to see queer places, sometimes, taking them home."

Eastman laughed dryly. "Every time I touch the circle of your acquaintance, Cavanaugh, it's a little wider. You must know New York pretty well by this time."

"Yes, but I'm on my good behavior below Twenty-third Street," the young man replied with simplicity. "My little friends down there would give me a good character. They're wise little girls. They have grand ways with each other, a romantic code of loyalty."

You can find a good many of the lost virtues among them."

The car was standing still in a traffic block at Fortieth Street, when Cavanaugh suddenly drew his face away from the window and touched Eastman's arm. "Look, please. You see that hansom with the bony gray horse—driver has a broken hat and red flannel around his throat. Can you see who is inside?"

Eastman peered out. The hansom was just cutting across the line, and the driver was making a great fuss about it, bobbing his head and waving his whip. He jerked his dripping old horse into Fortieth Street and clattered off past the Public Library grounds toward Sixth Avenue. "No, I couldn't see the passenger. Someone you know?"

"Could you see whether there was a passenger?" Cavanaugh asked.

"Why, yes. A man, I think. I saw his elbow on the apron. No driver ever behaves like that unless he has a passenger."

"Yes, I may have been mistaken," Cavanaugh murmured absently. Ten minutes or so later, after Cavanaugh's car had turned off Fifth Avenue into Fifty-eighth Street, Eastman exclaimed, "There's your same cabby, and his cart's empty. He's headed for a drink now, I suppose." The driver in the broken hat and the red flannel neck cloth was still brandishing the whip over his old gray. He was coming from the west now, and turned down Sixth Avenue, under the elevated.

Cavanaugh's car stopped at the bachelor apartment house between Sixth and Seventh Avenues where he and Eastman lived, and they went up in the elevator together. They were still talking when the lift stopped at Cavanaugh's floor, and Eastman stepped out with him and walked down the hall, finishing his sentence while Cavanaugh found his latchkey. When he opened the door, a wave of fresh cigarette smoke greeted them. Cavanaugh stopped short and stared into his hallway. "Now how in the devil—" he exclaimed angrily.

"Someone waiting for you? Oh, no, thanks. I wasn't coming in. I have to work tonight. Thank you, but I couldn't." Eastman nodded and went up the two flights to his own rooms.

Though Eastman did not customarily keep a servant, he had this winter a man who had been lent to him by a friend who was abroad. Rollins met him at the door and took his coat and hat.

"Put out my dinner clothes, Rollins, and then get out of here until ten o'clock. I've promised to go to a supper tonight. I shan't

be dining. I've had a late tea and I'm going to work until ten. You may put out some kumiss and biscuit for me."

Rollins took himself off, and Eastman settled down at the big table in his sitting room. He had to read a lot of letters submitted as evidence in a breach of contract case, and before he got very far he found that long paragraphs in some of the letters were written in German. He had a German dictionary at his office, but none here. Rollins had gone, and anyhow, the bookstores would be closed. He remembered having seen a row of dictionaries on the lower shelf of one of Cavanaugh's bookcases. Cavanaugh had a lot of books, though he never read anything but new stuff. Eastman prudently turned down his student's lamp very low—the thing had an evil habit of smoking—and went down two flights to Cavanaugh's door.

The young man himself answered Eastman's ring. He was freshly dressed for the evening, except for a brown smoking jacket, and his yellow hair had been brushed until it shone. He hesitated as he confronted his caller, still holding the door knob, and his round eyes and smooth forehead made their best imitation of a frown. When Eastman began to apologize, Cavanaugh's manner suddenly changed. He caught his arm and jerked him into the narrow hall. "Come in, come in. Right along!" he said excitedly. "Right along," he repeated as he pushed Eastman before him into his sitting room. "Well, I'll—" he stopped short at the door and looked about his own room with an air of complete mystification. The back window was wide open, and a strong wind was blowing in. Cavanaugh walked over to the window and stuck out his head, looking up and down the fire escape. When he pulled his head in, he drew down the sash.

"I had a visitor I wanted you to see," he explained with a nervous smile. "At least I thought I had. He must have gone out that way," nodding toward the window.

"Call him back. I only came to borrow a German dictionary, if you have one. Can't stay. Call him back."

Cavanaugh shook his head despondently. "No use. He's beat it. Nowhere in sight."

"He must be active. Has he left something?" Eastman pointed to a very dirty white glove that lay on the floor under the window.

"Yes, that's his." Cavanaugh reached for his tongs, picked up the glove, and tossed it into the grate, where it quickly shriveled on the coals.

Eastman felt that he had happened in upon something disagreeable, possibly something shady, and he wanted to get away at once. Cavanaugh stood staring at the fire and seemed stupid and dazed; so he repeated his request rather sternly, "I think I've seen a German dictionary down there among your books. May I have it?"

Cavanaugh blinked at him. "A German dictionary? Oh, possibly! Those were my father's. I scarcely know what there is." He put down the tongs and began to wipe his hands nervously with his handkerchief.

Eastman went over to the bookcase behind the chesterfield, opened the door, swooped upon the book he wanted, and stuck it under his arm. He felt perfectly certain now that something shady had been going on in Cavanaugh's rooms, and he saw no reason why he should come in for any hang-over. "Thanks. I'll send it back tomorrow," he said curtly as he made for the door.

Cavanaugh followed him. "Wait a moment. I wanted you to see him. You did see his glove," glancing at the grate.

Eastman laughed disagreeably. "I saw a glove. That's not evidence. Do your friends often use that means of exit? Somewhat inconvenient."

Cavanaugh gave him a startled glance. "Wouldn't you think so? For an old man, a very rickety old party? The ladders are steep, you know, and rusty." He approached the window again and put it up softly. In a moment he drew his head back with a jerk. He caught Eastman's arm and shoved him toward the window. "Hurry, please. Look! Down there." He pointed to the little patch of paved court four flights down.

The square of pavement was so small and the walls about it were so high, that it was a good deal like looking down a well. Four tall buildings backed upon the same court and made a kind of shaft, with flagstones at the bottom, and at the top a square of dark blue with some stars in it. At the bottom of the shaft Eastman saw a black figure, a man in a caped coat and a tall hat stealing cautiously around, not across the square of pavement, keeping close to the dark wall and avoiding the streak of light that fell on the flagstones from a window in the opposite house. Seen from that height he was of course foreshortened and probably looked more shambling and decrepit than he was. He picked his way along with exaggerated care and looked like a silly old cat crossing a wet street. When he reached the gate that led into an alley way between two buildings, he felt about for the latch, opened the door a

mere crack, and then shot out under the feeble lamp that burned in the brick arch over the gateway. The door closed after him.

"He'll get run in," Eastman remarked curtly, turning away from the window. "That door shouldn't be left unlocked. Any crook could come in. I'll speak to the janitor about it, if you don't mind," he added sarcastically.

"Wish you would." Cavanaugh stood brushing down the front of his jacket, first with his right hand and then with his left. "You saw him, didn't you?"

"Enough of him. Seems eccentric. I have to see a lot of buggy people. They don't take me in any more. But I'm keeping you and I'm in a hurry myself. Goodnight."

Cavanaugh put out his hand detainingly and started to say something; but Eastman rudely turned his back and went down the hall and out of the door. He had never felt anything shady about Cavanaugh before, and he was sorry he had gone down for the dictionary. In five minutes he was deep in his papers; but in the half hour when he was loafing before he dressed to go out, the young man's curious behavior came into his mind again.

Eastman had merely a neighborly acquaintance with Cavanaugh. He had been to a supper at the young man's rooms once, but he didn't particularly like Cavanaugh's friends; so the next time he was asked, he had another engagement. He liked Cavanaugh himself, if for nothing else than because he was so cheerful and trim and ruddy. A good complexion is always at a premium in New York, especially when it shines reassuringly on a man who does everything in the world to lose it. It encourages fellow mortals as to the inherent vigor of the human organism and the amount of bad treatment it will stand for. "Footprints that perhaps another," etc.

Cavanaugh, he knew, had plenty of money. He was the son of a Pennsylvania preacher who died soon after he discovered that his ancestral acres were full of petroleum, and Kier had come to New York to burn some of the oil. He was thirty-two and was still at it; spent his life, literally, among the breakers. His motor hit the park every morning as if it were the first time ever. He took people out to supper every night. He went from restaurant to restaurant, sometimes to half a dozen in an evening. The headwaiters were his hosts, and their cordiality made him happy. They made a life-line for him up Broadway and down Fifth Avenue. Cavanaugh was still fresh and smooth, round and plump, with a lustre to his hair

and white teeth and a clear look in his round eyes. He seemed absolutely unwearied and unimpaired; never bored and never carried away.

Eastman always smiled when he met Cavanaugh in the entrance hall, serenely going forth to or returning from gladiatorial combats with joy, or when he saw him rolling smoothly up to the door in his car in the morning after a restful night in one of the remarkable new roadhouses he was always finding. Eastman had seen a good many young men disappear on Cavanaugh's route, and he admired this young man's endurance.

Tonight, for the first time, he had got a whiff of something unwholesome about the fellow—bad nerves, bad company, something on hand that he was ashamed of, a visitor old and vicious, who must have had a key to Cavanaugh's apartment, for he was evidently there when Cavanaugh returned at seven o'clock. Probably it was the same man Cavanaugh had seen in the hansom. He must have been able to let himself in, for Cavanaugh kept no man but his chauffeur; or perhaps the janitor had been instructed to let him in. In either case, and whoever he was, it was clear enough that Cavanaugh was ashamed of him and was mixing up in questionable business of some kind.

Eastman sent Cavanaugh's book back by Rollins, and for the next few weeks he had no word with him beyond a casual greeting when they happened to meet in the hall or the elevator. One Sunday morning Cavanaugh telephoned up to him to ask if he could motor out to a roadhouse in Connecticut that afternoon and have supper, but when Eastman found there were to be other guests he declined.

On New Year's Eve Eastman dined at the University Club at six o'clock and hurried home before the usual manifestations of insanity had begun in the streets. When Rollins brought his smoking coat, he asked him whether he wouldn't like to get off early.

"Yes, sir. But won't you be dressing, Mr. Eastman?" he inquired.

"Not tonight." Eastman handed him a bill. "Bring some change in the morning. There'll be fees."

Rollins lost no time in putting everything to rights for the night, and Eastman couldn't help wishing that he were in such a hurry to be off somewhere himself. When he heard the hall door close softly, he wondered if there were any place, after all, that he wanted to go. From his window he looked down at the long lines

of motors and taxis waiting for a signal to cross Broadway. He thought of some of their probable destinations and decided that none of those places pulled him very hard. The night was warm and wet, the air was drizzly. Vapor hung in clouds about the Times Building, half hid the top of it, and made a luminous haze along Broadway. While he was looking down at the army of wet, black carriagetops and their reflected headlights and taillights, Eastman heard a ring at his door. He deliberated. If it were a caller, the hall porter would have telephoned up. It must be the janitor. When he opened the door, there stood a rosy young man in a tuxedo, without a coat or hat.

"Pardon. Should I have telephoned? I half thought you wouldn't be in."

Eastman laughed. "Come in, Cavanaugh. You weren't sure whether you wanted company or not, eh, and you were trying to let chance decide it? That was exactly my state of mind. Let's accept the verdict." When they emerged from the narrow hall into his sitting room, he pointed out a seat by the fire to his guest. He brought a tray of decanters and soda bottles and placed it on his writing table.

Cavanaugh hesitated, standing by the fire. "Sure you weren't starting for somewhere?"

"Do I look it? No, I was just making up my mind to stick it out alone when you rang. Have one?" he picked up a tall tumbler.

"Yes, thank you. I always do."

Eastman chuckled. "Lucky boy! So will I. I had a very early dinner. New York is the most arid place on holidays," he continued as he rattled the ice in the glasses. "When one gets too old to hit the rapids down there, and tired of gobbling food to heathenish dance music, there is absolutely no place where you can get a chop and some milk toast in peace, unless you have strong ties of blood brotherhood on upper Fifth Avenue. But you, why aren't you starting for somewhere?"

The young man sipped his soda and shook his head as he replied:

"Oh, I couldn't get a chop, either. I know only flashy people, of course." He looked up at his host with such a grave and candid expression that Eastman decided there couldn't be anything very crooked about the fellow. His smooth cheeks were positively cherubic.

"Well, what's the matter with them? Aren't they flashing to-night?"

"Only the very new ones seem to flash on New Year's Eve. The older ones fade away. Maybe they are hunting a chop, too."

"Well—" Eastman sat down "—holidays do dash one. I was just about to write a letter to a pair of maiden aunts in my old hometown, upstate; old coasting hill, snow-covered pines, lights in the church windows. That's what you've saved me from."

Cavanaugh shook himself. "Oh, I'm sure that wouldn't have been good for you. Pardon me," he rose and took a photograph from the bookcase, a handsome man in shooting clothes. "Dudley, isn't it? Did you know him well?"

"Yes. An old friend. Terrible thing, wasn't it? I haven't got over the jolt yet."

"His suicide? Yes, terrible! Did you know his wife?"

"Slightly. Well enough to admire her very much. She must be terribly broken up. I wonder Dudley didn't think of that."

Cavanaugh replaced the photograph carefully, lit a cigarette, and standing before the fire began to smoke. "Would you mind telling me about him? I never met him, but of course I'd read a lot about him, and I can't help feeling interested. It was a queer thing."

Eastman took out his cigar case and leaned back in his deep chair. "In the days when I knew him best he hadn't any story, like the happy nations. Everything was properly arranged for him before he was born. He came into the world happy, healthy, clever, straight, with the right sort of connections and the right kind of fortune, neither too large nor too small. He helped to make the world an agreeable place to live until he was twenty-six. Then he married as he should have married. His wife was a Californian, educated abroad. Beautiful. You have seen her picture?"

Cavanaugh nodded. "Oh, many of them."

"She was interesting, too. Though she was distinctly a person of the world, she had retained something, just enough of the large Western manner. She had the habit of authority, of calling out a special train if she needed it, of using all our ingenious mechanical contrivances lightly and easily, without overrating them. She and Dudley knew how to live better than most people. Their house was the most charming one I have ever known in New York. You felt freedom there, and a zest of life, and safety—absolute sanctuary—from everything sordid or petty. A whole society like that would justify the creation of man and would make our planet shine with a soft, peculiar radiance among the constellations. You think I'm putting it on thick?"

The young man sighed gently. "Oh no! One has always felt there must be people like that. I've never known any."

"They had two children, beautiful ones: After they had been married for eight years, Rosina met this Spaniard. He must have amounted to something. She wasn't a flighty woman. She came home and told Dudley how matters stood. He persuaded her to stay at home for six months and try to pull up. They were both fair-minded people, and I'm as sure as if I were the Almighty that she did try. But at the end of the time, Rosina went quietly off to Spain, and Dudley went to hunt in the Canadian Rockies. I met his party out there. I didn't know his wife had left him and talked about her a good deal. I noticed that he never drank anything, and his light used to shine through the log chinks of his room until all hours, even after a hard day's hunting. When I got back to New York, rumors were creeping about. Dudley did not come back. He bought a ranch in Wyoming, built a big log house and kept splendid dogs and horses. One of his sisters went out to keep house for him, and the children were there when they were not in school. He had a great many visitors, and everyone who came back talked about how well Dudley kept things going.

"He put in two years out there. Then, last month, he had to come back on business. A trust fund had to be settled up, and he was administrator. I saw him at the club; same light, quick step, same gracious handshake. He was getting gray, and there was something softer in his manner; but he had a fine red tan on his face and said he found it delightful to be here in the season when everything is going hard. The Madison Avenue house had been closed since Rosina left it. He went there to get some things his sister wanted. That, of course, was the mistake. He went alone, in the afternoon, and didn't go out for dinner—found some sherry and tins of biscuits in the sideboard. He shot himself sometime that night. There were pistols in his smoking room. They found burnt out candles beside him in the morning. The gas and electricity were shut off. I suppose there, in his own house, among his own things, it was too much for him. He left no letters."

Cavanaugh blinked and brushed the lapel of his coat. "I suppose," he said slowly, "that every suicide is logical and reasonable, if one knew all the facts."

Eastman roused himself. "No, I don't think so. I've known too many fellows who went off like that—more than I deserve, I think—and some of them were absolutely inexplicable. I can un-

derstand Dudley; but I can't see why healthy bachelors, with money enough, like ourselves, need such a device. It reminds me of what Dr. Johnson said, that the most discouraging thing about life is the number of fads and hobbies and fake religions it takes to put people through a few years of it."

"Dr. Johnson? The specialist? Oh, the old fellow!" said Cavanaugh imperturbably. "Yes, that's interesting. Still, I fancy if one knew the facts—did you know about Wyatt?"

"I don't think so."

"You wouldn't, probably. He was just a fellow about town who spent money. He wasn't one of the *forestieri*, though. Had connections here and owned a fine old place over on Staten Island. He went in for botany, and had been all over, hunting things; rusts, I believe. He had a yacht and used to take a gay crowd down about the South Seas, botanizing. He really did botanize, I believe. I never knew such a spender—only not flashy. He helped a lot of fellows and he was awfully good to girls, the kind who come down here to get a little fun, who don't like to work and still aren't really tough, the kind you see talking hard for their dinner. Nobody knows what becomes of them, or what they get out of it, and there are hundreds of new ones every year. He helped dozens of 'em; it was he who got me curious about the little shopgirls. Well, one afternoon when his tea was brought, he took prussic acid instead. He didn't leave any letters, either; people of any taste don't. They wouldn't leave any material reminder if they could help it. His lawyers found that he had just three hundred fourteen dollars and seventy-two cents above his debts when he died. He had planned to spend all his money, and then take his tea; he had worked it out carefully."

Eastman reached for his pipe and pushed his chair away from the fire. "That looks like a considered case, but I don't think philosophical suicides like that are common. I think they usually come from stress of feeling and are really, as the newspapers call them, desperate acts, done without a motive. You remember when Anna Karenina was under the wheels, she kept saying, 'Why am I here?'"

Cavanaugh rubbed his upper lip with his pink finger and made an effort to wrinkle his brows. "May I, please?" reaching for the whisky. "But have you," he asked, blinking as the soda flew at him, "have you ever known, yourself, cases that were really inexplicable?"

"A few too many. I was in Washington just before Captain Jack Purden was married, and I saw a good deal of him. Popular army man, fine record in the Philippines, married a charming girl with lots of money, mutual devotion. It was the gayest wedding of the winter, and they started for Japan. They stopped in San Francisco for a week and missed their boat because, as the bride wrote back to Washington, they were too happy to move. They took the next boat, were both good sailors, had exceptional weather. After they had been out for two weeks, Jack got up from his deck chair one afternoon, yawned, put down his book, and stood before his wife. 'Stop reading for a moment and look at me.' She laughed and asked him why. 'Because you happen to be good to look at.' He nodded to her, went back to the stern, and was never seen again. Must have gone down to the lower deck and slipped overboard, behind the machinery. It was the luncheon hour, not many people about, steamer cutting through a soft green sea. That's one of the most baffling cases I know. His friends raked up his past, and it was as trim as a cottage garden. If he'd so much as dropped an inkspot on his fatigue uniform, they'd have found it. He wasn't emotional or moody; wasn't, indeed, very interesting; simply a good soldier, fond of all the pompous little formalities that make up a military man's life. What do you make of that, my boy?"

Cavanaugh stroked his chin. "It's very puzzling, I admit. Still, if one knew everything—"

"But we do know everything. His friends wanted to find something to help them out, to help the girl out, to help the case of the human creature."

"Oh, I don't mean things that people could unearth," said Cavanaugh uneasily. "But possibly there were things that couldn't be found out."

Eastman shrugged his shoulders. "It's my experience that when there are 'things' as you call them, they're very apt to be found. There is no such thing as a secret. To make any move at all one has to employ human agencies, employ at least one human agent. Even when the pirates killed the men who buried their gold for them, the bones told the story."

Cavanaugh rubbed his hands together and smiled his sunny smile.

"I like that idea. It's reassuring. If we can have no secrets, it means that we can't, after all, go so far afield as we might," he hesitated, "yes, as we might."

Eastman looked at him sourly. "Cavanaugh, when you've practiced law in New York for twelve years, you find that people can't go far in any direction, except—" He thrust his forefinger sharply at the floor. "Even in that direction, few people can do anything out of the ordinary. Our range is limited. Skip a few baths, and we become personally objectionable. The slightest carelessness can rot a man's integrity or give him ptomaine poisoning. We keep up only by incessant cleansing operations, of mind and body. What we call character, is held together by all sorts of tacks and strings and glue."

Cavanaugh looked startled. "Come now, it's not so bad as that, is it? I've always thought that a serious man, like you, must know a lot of Lancelots." When Eastman only laughed, the younger man squirmed about in his chair. He spoke again hastily, as if he were embarrassed. "Your military friend may have had personal experiences, however, that his friends couldn't possibly get a line on. He may accidentally have come to a place where he saw himself in too unpleasant a light. I believe people can be chilled by a draft from outside, somewhere."

"Outside?" Eastman echoed. "Ah, you mean the far outside! Ghosts, delusions, eh?"

Cavanaugh winced. "That's putting it strong. Why not say tips from the outside? Delusions belong to a diseased mind, don't they? There are some of us who have no minds to speak of, who yet have had experiences. I've had a little something in that line myself, and I don't look it, do I?"

Eastman looked at the bland countenance turned toward him. "Not exactly. What's your delusion?"

"It's not a delusion. It's a haunt."

The lawyer chuckled. "Soul of a lost Casino girl?"

"No; an old gentleman. A most unattractive old gentleman, who follows me about."

"Does he want money?"

Cavanaugh sat up straight. "No. I wish to God he wanted anything—but the pleasure of my society! I'd let him clean me out to be rid of him. He's a real article. You saw him yourself that night when you came to my rooms to borrow a dictionary, and he went down the fire escape. You saw him in the court."

"Well, I saw somebody down in the court, but I'm too cautious to take it for granted that I saw what you saw. Why, anyhow, should I see your haunt? If it was your friend I saw, he impressed

me disagreeably. How did you pick him up?"

Cavanaugh looked gloomy. "That was queer, too. Charley Burke and I had motored out to Long Beach, about a year ago, sometime in October, I think. We had supper and stayed until late. When we were coming home, my car broke down. We had a lot of girls along who had to get back for morning rehearsals and things, so I sent them all into town in Charley's car, and he was to send a man back to tow me home. I was driving myself and didn't want to leave my machine. We had not taken a direct road back, so I was stuck in a lonesome, woody place, no houses about. I got chilly and made a fire, and was putting in the time comfortably enough, when this old party steps up. He was in shabby evening clothes and a top hat, and had on his usual white gloves. How he got there, at three o'clock in the morning, miles from any town or railway, I'll leave it to you to figure out. *He* surely had no car. When I saw him coming up to the fire, I disliked him. He had a silly, apologetic walk. His teeth were chattering, and I asked him to sit down. He got down like a clotheshorse folding up. I offered him a cigarette, and when he took off his gloves I couldn't help noticing how knotted and spotty his hands were. He was asthmatic and took his breath with a wheeze. 'Haven't you got anything—refreshing in there?' he asked, nodding at the car. When I told him I hadn't, he sighed. 'Ah, you young fellows are greedy. You drink it all up. You drink it all up, all up—up!' he kept chewing it over."

Cavanaugh paused and looked embarrassed again. "The thing that was most unpleasant is difficult to explain. The old man sat there by the fire and leered at me with a silly sort of admiration that was—well, more than humiliating. 'Gay boy, gay dog!' he would mutter, and when he grinned he showed his teeth, worn and yellow—shells. I remembered that it was better to talk casually to insane people, so I remarked carelessly that I had been out with a party and got stuck.

"'Oh yes, I remember,' he said, 'Flora and Lottie and Maybelle and Marcelline, and poor Kate.'

"He had named them correctly, so I began to think I had been hitting the bright waters too hard.

"Things I drank never had seemed to make me woody, but you can never tell when trouble is going to hit you. I pulled my hat down and tried to look as uncommunicative as possible, but he kept croaking on from time to time, like this: 'Poor Katie! Splendid arms, but dope got her. She took up with Eastern religions after

she had her hair dyed. Got to going to a swami's joint, and smoking opium. Temple of the Lotus, it was called, and the police raided it.'

"This was nonsense, of course; the young woman was in the pink of condition. I let him rave, but I decided that if something didn't come out for me pretty soon, I'd foot it across Long Island. There wasn't room enough for the two of us. I got up and took another try at my car. He hopped right after me.

"'Good car,' he wheezed, 'better than the little Ford.'

"I'd had a Ford before, but so has everybody; that was a safe guess.

"'Still,' he went on, 'that run in from Huntington Bay in the rain wasn't bad. Arrested for speeding, he-he.'

"It was true I had made such a run, under rather unusual circumstances, and had been arrested. When at last I heard my lifeboat snorting up the road, my visitor got up, sighed, and stepped back into the shadow of the trees. I didn't wait to see what became of him, you may believe. That was visitation number one. What do you think of it?"

Cavanaugh looked at his host defiantly. Eastman smiled.

"I think you'd better change your mode of life, Cavanaugh. Had any returns?" he inquired.

"Too many, by far." The young man took a turn about the room and came back to the fire. Standing by the mantel he lit another cigarette before going on with his story:

"The second visitation happened in the street, early in the evening, about eight o'clock. I was held up in a traffic block before the Plaza. My chauffeur was driving. Old Nibbs steps up out of the crowd, opens the door of my car, gets in, and sits down beside me. He had on wilted evening clothes, same as before, and there was some sort of heavy scent about him. Such an unpleasant old party! A thorough-going rotter; you knew it at once. This time he wasn't talkative as he had been when I first saw him. He leaned back in the car as if he owned it, crossed his hands on his stick, and looked out at the crowd—sort of hungrily.

"I own I really felt a loathing compassion for him. We got down the avenue slowly. I kept looking out at the mounted police. But what could I do? Have him pulled? I was afraid to. I was awfully afraid of getting him into the papers.

"I'm going to the New Astor," I said at last. 'Can I take you anywhere?'

"'No, thank you,' says he. 'I get out when you do. I'm due on West Forty-fourth. I'm dining tonight with Marcelline—all that is left of her!'

"He puts his hand to his hatbrim with a gruesome salute. Such a scandalous, foolish old face as he had! When we pulled up at the Astor, I stuck my hand in my pocket and asked him if he'd like a little loan.

"'No, thank you, but—' he leaned over and whispered, ugh! '—but save a little, save a little. Forty years from now—a little—comes in handy. Save a little.'

"His eyes fairly glittered as he made his remark. I jumped out. I'd have jumped into the North River. When he tripped off, I asked my chauffeur if he'd noticed the man who got into the car with me. He said he knew someone was with me, but he hadn't noticed just when he got in. Want to hear any more?"

Cavanaugh dropped into his chair again. His plump cheeks were a trifle more flushed than usual, but he was perfectly calm. Eastman felt that the young man believed what he was telling him.

"Of course I do. It's very interesting. I don't see quite where you are coming out though."

Cavanaugh sniffed. "No more do I. I really feel that I've been put upon. I haven't deserved it any more than any other fellow of my kind. Doesn't that impress you disagreeably?"

"Well, rather so. Has anyone else seen your friend?"

"You saw him."

"We won't count that. As I said, there's no certainty that you and I saw the same person in the court that night. Has anyone else had a look in?"

"People sense him rather than see him. He usually crops up when I'm alone or in a crowd on the street. He never approaches me when I'm with people I know, though I've seen him hanging around the stage exit, under a wall; or across the street, in a doorway. To be frank, I'm not anxious to introduce him. The third time, it was I who came upon him. In November my driver, Harry, had a sudden attack of appendicitis. I took him to the Presbyterian Hospital in the car, early in the evening. When I came home, I found the old villain in my rooms. I offered him a drink, and he sat down. It was the first time I had seen him in a steady light, with his hat off.

"His face is lined like a railway map, and as to color—Lord, what a liver! His scalp grows tight to his skull, and his hair is dyed until

it's perfectly dead, like a piece of black cloth."

Cavanaugh ran his fingers through his own neatly trimmed thatch and seemed to forget where he was for a moment.

"I had a twin brother, Brian, who died when we were sixteen. I have a photograph of him on my wall, an enlargement from a Kodak of him, doing a high jump, rather good thing, full of action. It seemed to annoy the old gentleman. He kept looking at it and lifting his eyebrows, and finally he got up, tiptoed across the room, and turned the picture to the wall.

"Poor Brian! Fine fellow, but died young," says he.

"Next morning, there was the picture, still reversed."

"Did he stay long?" Eastman asked interestedly.

"Half an hour, by the clock."

"Did he talk?"

"Well, he rambled."

"What about?"

Cavanaugh rubbed his pale eyebrows before answering.

"About things that an old man ought to want to forget. His conversation is highly objectionable. Of course he knows me like a book; everything I've ever done or thought. But when he recalls them, he throws a bad light on them, somehow. Things that weren't much off color, look rotten. He doesn't leave one a shred of self-respect, he really doesn't. That's the amount of it." The young man whipped out his handkerchief and wiped his face.

"Oh dear, yes! Recalls things that happened in school. Anything disagreeable. Funny thing, he always turns Brian's picture to the wall."

"Does he come often?"

"Yes, oftener, now. Of course I don't know how he gets in downstairs. The hall boys never see him. But he has a key to my door. I don't know how he got it, but I can hear him turn it in the lock."

"Why don't you keep your driver with you, or telephone for me to come down?"

"He'd only grin and go down the fire escape as he did before. He's often done it when Harry's come in suddenly. Everybody has to be alone sometimes, you know. Besides, I don't want anybody else to see him. He has me there."

"But why not? Why do you feel responsible for him?"

Cavanaugh smiled wearily. "That's rather the point, isn't it? Why do I? But I absolutely do. That identifies him, more than his knowing all about my life and my affairs."

Eastman looked at Cavanaugh thoughtfully. "Well, I should advise you to go in for something altogether different and new, and go in for it hard; business, engineering, metallurgy, something this old fellow wouldn't be interested in. See if you can make him remember logarithms."

Cavanaugh sighed. "No, he has me there, too. People never really change; they go on being themselves. But I would never make much trouble. Why can't they let me alone, damn it! I'd never hurt anybody, except, perhaps—"

"Except your old gentleman, eh?" Eastman laughed. "Seriously, Cavanaugh, if you want to shake him, I think a year on a ranch would do it. He would never be coaxed far from his favorite haunts. He would dread Montana."

Cavanaugh pursed up his lips. "So do I!"

"Oh, you think you do. Try it, and you'll find out. A gun and a horse beats all this sort of thing. Besides losing your haunt, you'd be putting ten years in the bank for yourself. I know a good ranch where they take people, if you want to try it."

"Thank you. I'll consider. Do you think I'm batty?"

"No, but I think you've been doing one sort of thing too long. You need big horizons. Get out of this."

Cavanaugh smiled meekly. He rose lazily and yawned behind his hand. "It's late, and I've taken your whole evening." He strolled over to the window and looked out. "Queer place, New York; rough on the little fellows. Don't you feel sorry for them, the girls especially? I do. What a fight they put up for a little fun! Why, even that old goat is sorry for them, the only decent thing he kept."

Eastman followed him to the door and stood in the hall, while Cavanaugh waited for the elevator. When the car came up Cavanaugh extended his pink, warm hand. "Goodnight."

The cage sank, and his rosy countenance disappeared, his round-eyed smile being the last thing to go.

Weeks passed before Eastman saw Cavanaugh again. One morning just as he was starting for Washington to argue a case before the Supreme Court, Cavanaugh telephoned him at his office to ask him about the Montana ranch he had recommended; said he meant to take his advice and go out there for the spring and summer.

When Eastman got back from Washington, he saw dusty trunks just up from the trunk room, before Cavanaugh's door. Next morning when he stopped to see what the young man was about, he

found Cavanaugh in his shirtsleeves, packing.

"I'm really going; off tomorrow night. You didn't think it of me, did you?" he asked gaily.

"Oh, I've always had hopes of you!" Eastman declared. "But you are in a hurry, it seems to me."

"Yes, I am in a hurry." Cavanaugh shot a pair of leggings into one of the open trunks. "I telegraphed your ranch people, used your name, and they said it would be all right. By the way, some of my crowd are giving a little dinner for me at Rector's tonight. Couldn't you be persuaded, as it's a farewell occasion?" Cavanaugh looked at him hopefully.

Eastman laughed and shook his head. "Sorry, Cavanaugh, but that's too gay a world for me. I've got too much work lined up before me. I wish I had time to stop and look at your guns, though. You seem to know something about guns. You've more than you'll need, but nobody can have too many good ones." He put down one of the revolvers regretfully. "I'll drop in to see you in the morning, if you're up."

"I shall be up, all right. I've warned my crowd that I'll cut away before midnight."

"You won't, though," Eastman called back over his shoulder as he hurried downstairs.

The next morning, while Eastman was dressing, Rollins came in greatly excited.

"I'm a little late, sir. I was stopped by Harry, Mr. Cavanaugh's driver. Mr. Cavanaugh shot himself last night, sir."

Eastman dropped his vest and sat down on his shoebox. "You're drunk, Rollins," he shouted. "He's going away today!"

"Yes, sir. Harry found him this morning. Ah, he's quite dead, sir. Harry's telephoned for the coroner. Harry don't know what to do with the ticket."

Eastman pulled on his coat and ran down the stairway. Cavanaugh's trunks were strapped and piled before the door. Harry was walking up and down the hall with a long green railroad ticket in his hand and a look of complete stupidity on his face.

"What shall I do about this ticket, Mr. Eastman?" he whispered. "And what about his trunks? He had me tell the transfer people to come early. They may be here any minute. Yes, sir. I brought him home in the car last night, before twelve, as cheerful as could be."

"Be quiet, Harry. Where is he?"

"In his bed, sir."

Eastman went into Cavanaugh's sleeping room. When he came back to the sitting room, he looked over the writing table; railway folders, timetables, receipted bills, nothing else. He looked up for the photograph of Cavanaugh's twin brother. There it was, turned to the wall. Eastman took it down and looked at it; a boy in track clothes, half lying in the air, going over the string shoulders first, above the heads of a crowd of lads who were running and cheering. The face was somewhat blurred by the motion and the bright sunlight. Eastman put the picture back as he found it. Had Cavanaugh entertained his visitor last night, and had the old man been more convincing than usual? "Well, at any rate, he's seen to it that the old man can't establish identity. What a soft lot they are, fellows like poor Cavanaugh!" Eastman thought of his office as a delightful place.

(continued from page 4)

Mr. Hill, who also writes poetry, presently edits a business newspaper in San Diego, his hometown.

Finally, we want to thank the anonymous reader who sent us a copy of Willa Cather's rather little-known story "Consequences," our Mystery Clas-

sic. We were intrigued by this wonderfully evocative and eerie tale of New York and some of its denizens and greatly appreciated having it brought to our attention. But we *do* wish we knew whom to thank!

"Consequences" was first published by *McClure's* magazine in November 1915.

BOOKED & PRINTED

by Mary Cannon



Jan Burke is a hot new writer on the scene, and fans of Patricia Cornwell will appreciate her plot-driven tales. **Dear Irene**, the third in her series, finds intrepid beat reporter Irene Kelly back at her old job at the *Las Piernas News Express* in Southern California. In the stack of mail on her desk is a letter from an anonymous reader who dubs her his "Cassandra" and signs himself "Thanatos," the Greek word for death. He (or she) predicts the imminent death of "Clio," and sure enough, a woman is killed in a way that fits Thanatos's warning riddle. Thus begins a heart-pulsing search for a serial killer who has obviously cast Irene in a central role in this high tragedy. Not for the faint of heart, but just the cup of tea for readers who enjoy thrillers with a female strong-hearted protagonist (Simon & Schuster, \$20).

A new entry in one of my favorite historical mystery series, **Poseidon's Gold** by Lindsey Davis (Crown, \$22), brings back Marcus Didius Falco, Imperial Rome's answer to Sam Spade. A notable difference is that Davis writes with a sense of humor poised precariously between the serious and the slapstick. This time out it's not one of his clients but Falco's large family that embroils the professional informer and his fair Helena in a zany adventure filled with murder, art forgery, and old family secrets. It seems that one of the schemes of his ne'er-do-well brother (who surprised everyone by dying a heroic soldier's death on foreign soil) has left Falco with some unfinished business. As always, it falls to the good son to sort things out, even though it means working alongside his estranged father. Falco, who narrates his own tale, is quick-witted and mirthful, a perfect tour guide to Davis's portrait of ancient Rome.

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Fans of Dick Francis should seek out the work of British author Sam Llewellyn, who does for ships, boats, and sailing what Francis does for horseracing. His latest is **Maelstrom** (Pocket, \$20), the perfect metaphor for the tumultuous events that challenge his sympathetic protagonist. Hope is a man haunted by a past that includes jail time as a convicted eco-terrorist. The incident left him emotionally estranged from his wealthy wife and coconspirator, who was paralyzed when things went awry. Now it looks as if he's going to lose the only other person in his life, his uncle Ernie, who's been set up and convicted of smuggling. The complex plot unravels quickly in nonstop action scenes on the water and on neo-Nazi land, while flashbacks gradually reveal a conspiracy against Ernie that goes back decades. Llewellyn obviously knows his way around the craft of sailing, and the sea lore is super, while readers will find Hope's humanity irresistible and the supporting characters memorable.

Actress Jocelyn O'Roarke discovers that perhaps one shouldn't go home again in **The Queen Is Dead** (Viking, \$19.95) by Jane Dentinger. Josh is just back in New York after a stint in Hollywood when she gets an urgent call from an old friend: their college mentor, Tessa Grant, is dead. That has left Josh's alma mater without its star for its upcoming production of *A Winter's Tale*. The show was a last-ditch effort to save the quaint college's theater department. Would Josh fill in for Tessa? She has broken up with her New York police detective boyfriend and she hero-worshipped Tessa, so Josh sets off for Corinth College with few reservations. Even those disappear when she's reunited with her old college roommate and former best friend. But there's more than the usual backstage jitters plaguing the company. Rivalries, jealousies, past liaisons, and academic politics threaten the show even as Phillip Gerard shows up to woo his lady back to his arms. After four previous forays involving murder, Josh begins to harbor suspicions about Tessa's untimely demise. Dentinger's heroine is sassy, smart, and savvy; in combination with the backstage setting this series is a winner.

In her fourth Inspector Monk novel, Anne Perry puts the estimable Nurse Hester Latterly in deadly jeopardy, and it's up to Monk and barrister Oliver Rathbone to save her in **The Sins of the Wolf** (Fawcett, \$20). Hester was one of Miss Nightingale's nurses in the Crimea who returned to England and found herself overqualified and too impatient to suffer fools gladly to get work in the Victorian hospital system. Instead she supports herself as a private nurse. When the novel opens she has been hired by Mrs. Mary Farraline's

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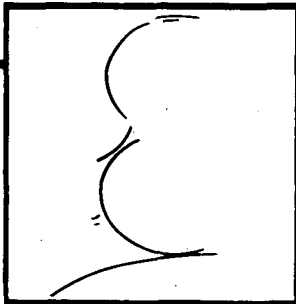
family to escort the elderly woman on the train from Edinburgh to London. Hester administers the patient's medicine per her instructions, and is grieved to wake up in their compartment the next morning to discover that the woman has died during the night. She's shocked when the police, aided by an anonymous tip, search her luggage and discover the dead woman's brooch in her belongings. Then a postmortem reveals that the woman died of an overdose. The case against her looks grim as Monk and Rathbone work furiously to save Hester from the gallows. As always, Anne Perry exquisitely details Victorian life and mores while subtly unveiling the psychology of an entire cast of fascinating characters. But be warned: Anne Perry is addictive.

Two authors are exploring crime on the Eastern seaboard with equally satisfying results. Paul Kemprecos's **Feeding Frenzy** (Bantam, \$4.95) puts his fisherman-private eye Aristotle "Soc" Socarides on Cape Cod at the height of the tourist season. A tourist is mauled to death in the water within view of the lifeguards. A waterfront summer camp for kids is threatened with foreclosure. And Flagg, a dangerous former comrade from Soc's Vietnam days, turns up with a diving assignment that's marked top secret. If you're looking for high adventure set against a popular tourist background, try Kemprecos.

Off Season is Philip R. Craig's fifth Martha's Vineyard mystery starring former Boston cop J. W. Jackson (Scribners, \$20). It's shorter on action-adventure but longer on other appealing qualities: a locale reverently painted in its natural beauty; romantic quiet times with a lover in front of a fire; and tempting meals prepared by a talented chef who has just caught his own lunch. Autumn is in the air and the tourists have fled, which should allow the island to settle down in peace. There's trouble abrewing, however, in the heated conflict between developers, hunters, and preservationists over a large parcel of land. As Christmas approaches; a local character is struck down by an arrow. There will obviously be no peace or good will for island folks until Jackson can track down someone who is hunting illegal game. Reading Philip R. Craig is armchair traveling at its finest.

MURDER BY DIRECTION

by William Heller



Quick—catch a John Dahl film before he goes Hollywood. Dahl, you might remember, is the director and cowriter responsible for the quirky, delightful *Red Rock West*, a thriller that went first to cable television, then to video, and finally to theaters.

Dahl's newest work, *The Last Seduction*, is a deliciously diabolical film noir that has followed a similar route. With this effort, Dahl has shown himself to be a master of the genre, which today suffers from too many pale imitations of the real thing. John Dahl, who this time around relies on the wonderful writing of Steve Barancik, is the real thing.*

All the ingredients needed for top-notch film noir are here: greed, lust, moral depravity.

And at the center of this wickedly engaging story is the greedy, lustful, and morally depraved Bridget Gregory (Linda Fiorentino).

This savvy New Yorker rips off her own husband (Bill Pullman), a wayward doctor who comes home with a bag full of cash, the proceeds of a dicey drug deal. While he's in the shower, she splits with the loot and goes on the road with barely a glance in her rear view mirror.

Like Dahl's one-bar town of Red Rock West where Nicolas Cage found himself stuck, Bridget winds up in a squeaky clean burg called Beston, just outside of Buffalo.

While she's seeking the escape of anonymity in Beston, she encounters a naive, good-

*NOTE: We like Barancik's writing, too. Four of his stories appeared in AHMM from 1988-1990.—ED.

looking young fellow named Mike Swale (Peter Berg) who'll do anything he can to get out of this dead-end town. "I cannot spend the rest of my life here," Mike tells his pals at the local tavern. Describing the local women, he continues, "These women are anchors. You get close to them, you're stuck in Beston for life."

So when he sees Bridget cosy up to the bar demanding a Manhattan without saying please, he's hooked.

Their romance is wild, if a bit one-sided. It's Mike who wants a commitment, wants to know more about his mysterious new lover. "Where do I fit in?" he whines, looking like a lost puppy.

The contrast between the two is never clearer than when, during a foray into Mike's kitchen, she stubs out her cigarette butt in a pie that bears a note, "Love, Grandma."

With her husband on the lookout for her, Bridget sets up house in Beston. There, she changes her name and gets a job at an insurance company where Mike also works. Quickly catching on to the insurance game, our gal gets a line on a clever insurance scam that she intends to use to further her wicked ends.

As the gum-snapping, poker-faced scheming seductress, Linda Fiorentino is one for the

ages. With her dark tresses curled ever so slightly to cover one eye, she suggests a young Lauren Bacall. And she's just as icy cool. Pity any man who stands in her way.

Not since Kathleen Turner took William Hurt for a spin in *Body Heat* have we seen such a steamy heroine on screen. And not since *Double Indemnity* have we witnessed such an original insurance scam on film.

Peter Berg, the slender, boyish-looking boyfriend who finds himself snared in Bridget's web, is well suited for the part. He gives his unsophisticated character a certain charm, and you can't help but feel a little sorry for him. Beside him, Fred MacMurray in *Double Indemnity* looks like a tough-hearted he-man.

Everything in *The Last Seduction* is just right, right down to the jazzy score from Joseph Vitarelli.

We can only hope that John Dahl isn't corrupted by the glamor, hype, and big bucks of Hollywood. His next thriller, *Unforgettable*, is the story of a medical examiner who uses experimental memory drugs on himself in pursuit of a killer. For that he should get the wide exposure he deserves.

Right now, Dahl is the Dahling of film noir fans everywhere.

THE STORY THAT WON



The November Mysterious by Rosanne Limoncelli of able mentions go to Larry M. James Wilson of Saint Hel-Winter Haven, Florida; Fran Smith of Hilo, Hawaii; Sandra Phillips of Dade City, Florida; Heather Anne Ahrens of Ithaca, New York; R. J. Stevens of Calgary, Alberta, Canada; J. L. Anderson of Boulder, Colorado; Robert Kesling of Ann Arbor, Michigan; Amanda Farris of Upper Montclair, New Jersey; T. Coley Sirmons of Cochran, Georgia; Kat Lebo of Lafayette, Indiana; Linda Reed of Bakersfield, California; and Mary Gardner of Franklin, North Carolina.

Photograph contest was won Brooklyn, New York. Honorable mentions, Oregon; Larry Sutton of Keeton of Martinez, Georgia; Sandra Phillips of Dade City, Florida; Heather Anne Ahrens of Ithaca, New York; R. J. Stevens of Calgary, Alberta, Canada; J. L. Anderson of Boulder, Colorado; Robert Kesling of Ann Arbor, Michigan; Amanda Farris of Upper Montclair, New Jersey; T. Coley Sirmons of Cochran, Georgia; Kat Lebo of Lafayette, Indiana; Linda Reed of Bakersfield, California; and Mary Gardner of Franklin, North Carolina.

UP A TREE by Rosanne Limoncelli

Benny was sitting there, crying, on the curb. I sat down next to him and offered him a piece of bubble gum. He crammed it into his mouth.

"What's up, Benny?"

He sniffed and looked up. There, dangling in the branches of a tree, was a pair of work boots.

"Where'd those come from?"

"I threw them."

I waited.

"When I got home from school, I heard something in the basement. Those boots were on the stairs, and I could hear a burglar down there." He chomped on his gum. "I had to call the police but I was afraid he'd get away, so I took the boots and called 911, real quiet. Then I took some glasses from the cupboard and threw them hard on the stairs so they would smash."

"Sounds good to me." I smiled at him. His face clouded up.

"I ran out of the house and threw the boots up into the tree." He looked up at them, and I thought he was going to start crying again. "Problem was, it was the plumber down there fixing a leak in the pipes, and Mom was down there with him." He looked at me with a pained expression on his face.

"I guess you been watching too much TV, Benny."

"That's what my mother said, too, and now I got no TV for a whole month." The tears sprang into his eyes again.

I sighed and handed him another piece of bubble gum.

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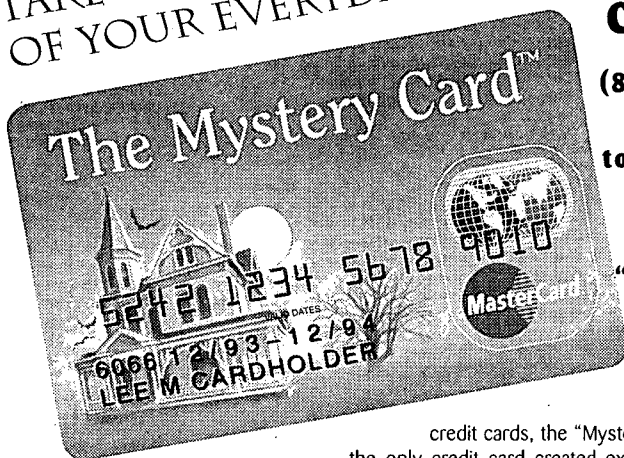
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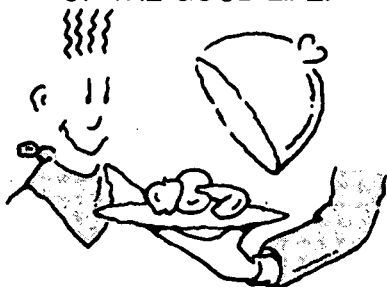
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